

Fortune's Fool

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Fortune's Fool

by [VampireFaun](#)

Summary

Xie Lian finds Yin Yu at the small reflecting pond behind Paradise Manor.

"Yin Yu," he says gently, sitting next to him.

"Your Highness."

"Could you tell me what San Lang was like, before he found me again? How did you two meet?"

Yin Yu looks down into the pond, watching the ripples distort his face.

"It's a long story," he says quietly, and begins.

Or: how Yin Yu met Hua Cheng, how the two of them met Black Water, and what Yin Yu learned about unconditional love and revenge along the way.

- Translation into Русский available: [Fortune's Fool](#) | [Шут судьбы](#) by [Confused_Mobula](#), [Neitent](#)

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Yin Yu first met Hua Cheng, he was flung to the floor at his feet.

There was no proper ghost city, back then; there was only a moving town of tents, crudely built, teeming with vulgar shouts and paper money flung here and there.

The unruly gathering created trouble wherever it was established. It moved every time it was threatened, which was often. Naturally, it wasn't a pleasant or stable place to live, by any stretch of the imagination—but it had something that ghosts were seldom offered: it was safe. This would have seemed impossible, given the population: half were roughened, violent ghosts, on the run from who-knows-what, and half were vulnerable spirits with nowhere else to turn. In any other place, this combination would be a recipe for disaster.

Not here, though.

Here, no one dared.

It had started as a small group of ghosts who followed Hua Cheng.

It was here that Yin Yu had run into trouble. He had tried to slip into this bizarre city of tents, just to disappear for a bit, desperate to escape the—

“WE FOUND ONE, MILORD!” a ghost shrieked out, tossing Yin Yu unceremoniously onto the ground. Yin Yu coughed, as he was thrown into sand; the tent city was currently set up in the desert, and the gritty taste of it had long worked its way into his mouth. “Cursed shackle, just like milord is looking for!”

The others cackled. “So lucky, so lucky!”

“Look how tender he looks! Would my Lord like to eat him?”

“I wonder what a cursed shackle tastes like—”

“We almost missed him! He hides well, it's like he's not there at all!”

Hua Cheng was facing away, towards the other side of the roomy tent. It was the biggest in the camp, and it echoed with his voice—

“Shut up.”

Everyone shut up. Then:

“He's not the one I'm looking for.”

A chill was in the air; none of the ghosts dared speak—until Hua Cheng went on:

“But you've done me a service. I'll remember. Continue to search.”

This was enough for the ghosts, who burst into cheers.

“YEAH, THANK YOU MILORD!”

“WE’LL LOOK IN EVERY NOOK AND CRANNY—”

“CAN WE TAKE THIS ONE HOME AND PICKLE HIM?”

Yin Yu stared into the ground, miserable, too tired to even wonder about why he’d been brought in or who he’d been mistaken for. Just his luck. If fate wanted him dead, why like this? If Hua Cheng didn’t kill him, the other ghosts would. He was just beginning to wonder if it was worth it to fight back, or whether pickling was an okay way to go, all things considered, when Hua Cheng’s voice came again:

“No. Leave him to me.”

The ghosts didn’t dare question him. They shrank back, bowing and singing praises, until they rushed out the door of the tent.

Yin Yu’s eyes widened, and a bead of sweat went down his neck. He didn’t dare lift his head.

Oh, he was *fucked* now.

But though he tensed, waiting for the crush of a foot on his neck, nothing came; and finally, he looked up to the sight of Hua Cheng watching him with interest.

“His *Highness* Yin Yu,” he said, mockingly.

Yin Yu cringed internally. “...my Lord has heard of me...?”

At that, Hua Cheng laughed humorlessly. “*Your* Lord? You’re not a ghost.”

In a swirl of red robes, Hua Cheng walked nearer, unsheathing his scimitar. He was a little wilder-looking back then; he hadn’t grown into subtlety yet, coloring himself like a poisonous snake would, as a warning: the vambraces were sharp with spikes.

His next words chilled Yin Yu to the bone:

“Give me one good reason to think you’re not here on heavenly orders, that you aren’t trying to gain favor and ascend again. Go on. Persuade me.”

There was no proof. Yin Yu knew there was no proof, so he just sighed. He was so tired, so tired.

“I don’t have any proof,” he mumbled, feeling pitiful. “You can kill me if you want.”

Hua Cheng looked down at him. “What was that?”

Yin Yu sighed heavily, raising his voice and repeating himself politely. “I said, I don’t have any proof, please kill me if you want to.”

When Hua Cheng spoke again, he sounded genuinely amused. “Then why are you here?”

He was going to have to explain himself before being executed? It just kept getting and better better. He inflated his lungs with much effort and breathed out a dry explanation: “My Lord must know that I caused havoc in the heavens, and this led to the deaths of others. Their allies want me dead. I was trying to hide from them here, since I know they don’t dare come here.”

“But you did,” Hua Cheng murmured.

Yin Yu didn’t answer. Hua Cheng went on:

“Do you want to live?”

“I suppose so.”

A mask was thrown at his feet, carved with a sad smile on it.

“Put this on, cover your shackle, and follow me outside. I’m announcing something to the camp, and I don’t want to repeat myself: there’s a big change coming, and I’d like a servant. If you decide you’re willing to follow me, then I’ll take you in. If you decide not to, you have three hours to leave the camp and face your enemies.”

Yin Yu stared at the mask, frozen in shock. Hua Cheng walked past him and spoke again:

“Come, get off the ground. The ghosts won’t kill you if you stay close to me. If you go astray and they catch you, it’s not my fault.”



Yin Yu stood behind Hua Cheng as he spoke, on a raised platform at the center of the makeshift ghost town.

At first, the ghosts had looked at Yin Yu, and he’d felt the uncomfortable prickle of hundreds of curious eyes; but soon the attention was removed from him, because Hua Cheng had begun to speak.

His command of language was impeccable; Yin Yu now understood how he’d been able to best the civil gods in debate. His speech was rich enough to seem cultured, but simple enough that it could be understood by more uneducated ghosts; his tone was equal parts hopeful and wistful, making one eager and sad in turn; but the sense of power in his words never wavered. For several minutes, under the rapt attention of the ghosts surrounding them, Hua Cheng told of his victories over tyrants and gods alike, sometimes vulgar, sometimes triumphant, sometimes dutiful, leaving space for the raucous cheers that burst forth with every tale—cheers which hushed instantly, when he raised his head to speak again. But he was coming to a point, and the point came:

“No land will welcome you,” he said coolly. “No town will have you settle nearby, no humans will tolerate your presence.” He paused, sweeping his gaze around. “But those that reject you still have the face to crave my power. I’ve received letters from many humans and gods alike, offering me anything to join them. They’ve told me to abandon you and leave you to the desert.”

The crowd erupted with wails—

“HUA CHENGZU! MILORD!”

“PLEASE—”

“WE’LL DO ANYTHING, ANYTHING!”

“We can’t survive without you, oh, what’ll we do—!”

“Silence,” Hua Cheng said quietly.

A dead hush blanketed the gathering.

“I would never bow to trash like that,” he said, clasping his hands behind his back. “But I won’t shepherd you around like this forever, either. It’s too troublesome.”

Gasps of fear sounded all around. The terror was infectious; Yin Yu even felt a pang of it in his own heart, at the threat of safety slipping away which held thick in the air.

“But I’ve found a place,” Hua Cheng said, so quietly that the ghosts didn’t even dare move, for fear of missing a single word. “It’s a land thick with yin energy, a land easily hidden, where we can stop moving and build up a city. I have things I want to do there; I’m going to settle there.”

With that, he’d come to the crux of the speech, and he raised his head:

“If you want to remain with me, obey me, pledge yourselves to me, then you can follow me there. Do me favors, and I’ll return them. Act justly, and you’ll be protected. Be loyal to me, and you’ll be rewarded. And if you don’t...”

He shrugged.

“You can still come.” His voice went smooth and dangerous. “Just don’t expect my protection. And if you cause trouble, your life will end then and there. I don’t like trouble, I’m bored of it. Am I clear?”

The mood from before, the trembling from fear, all poured into anxious gratitude instead. Cheers sounded all around, and the ghosts rushed up to the edges of the platform, raising their hands in fervent praise—

“WE’LL FOLLOW YOU!”

“YES, YES!”

“ANYTHING FOR YA, MILORD—”

“THANK YOU FOR YOUR PROTECTION, THANK YOU, THANK YOU—!”

“Pack your things,” Hua Cheng thundered, his eye blazing. “We leave at dawn.”

He turned to go amidst the cacophony of wild cheers that followed, and the ghosts moved aside to clear a path for him, some of them bowing down to the ground, some of them reaching as though hoping for him to touch them; but Hua Cheng only strode forward, stopping only to direct a glance towards Yin Yu.

Yin Yu stood frozen, dazed from the speech. With that look, however, he snapped out of it and followed him.

When they entered the main tent, the quiet atmosphere replaced the chaos of the outside. Yin Yu stood by, conflicted.

Hua Cheng turned to him and spoke:

“As I said, I need a servant,” he said, his voice flat now, devoid of the lofty emotions of the speech. “It’s your choice. You can ignore the rhetoric I used just now; I don’t expect loyalty from you, I just expect a job well-done. You’ll be compensated for it, just like with any job. If you don’t like it, cut and run whenever, I don’t care. Just don’t betray me, or you’ll pay the price.”

Yin Yu finally let out his breath and laughed quietly.

Hua Cheng raised a brow. “Oh? Is something funny?”

Yin Yu heaved a sigh. “Betray you for what? I don’t have anything to lose, and I don’t want anything, I’m just...”

After a pause, he looked up. He couldn’t have known back then that it was considered quite rude to ask certain things in ghost culture, so he quite plainly said—

“The only thing I want is...to be a good person,” he said quietly. “Or at least, not a bad person. I don’t know why you’re doing any of this, and...and that worries me. So, if I may ask, what’s your goal? What would I be helping you with? You must have a reason to stay.”

Hua Cheng smirked at the faux pas, but only replied: “What do you think?”

“Power,” Yin Yu said. He had no interest in playing dumb; what was obvious was obvious.

“Hm.”

“But—but I don’t know why.”

“Does there need to be a reason?” Hua Cheng said smoothly. “Doesn’t everyone like power? It’s fun to do whatever you want, kill whoever, acquire whatever. What else is power good for?”

Yin Yu didn’t know what to respond to that. Slowly, though, he tried again.

“Revenge,” he said. “It’s good for revenge.”

“That’s true.”

“But you already got your revenge, when you challenged those thirty-three gods. Yet you’re still here.”

“I’m still here,” Hua Cheng agreed.

“Why are you looking for someone with a cursed shackle?”

“I’ll tell you,” Hua Cheng said.

Yin Yu waited.

“If you find him,” Hua Cheng finished. Then he turned away, seemingly having lost interest in the conversation.

Or maybe he didn’t want to talk about it. It was hard to tell.

“Your answer,” Hua Cheng said simply, then. It didn’t seem he would waste any time.

Yin Yu was still conflicted. Still, wild and unpredictable though Hua Cheng was, something told Yin Yu that he wasn't one to break his word. If Yin Yu didn't want to do something, he might really just be able to leave. In any case, it wasn't as though he had much of a choice right now.

He knelt and bowed his head, still hidden behind the mask that would come to define him, and spoke:

“Hua Chengzhu, your orders.”

Chapter End Notes

starts another fanfiction THIS IS FINE

MAN...YIN YU IS JUST SUCH A CONCEPT!!! HOW COULD I NOT MAKE YIN YU
ANGST

i SHOULD be able to update tomorro or the next day, the next chapter is almost all written. also i
know im sleepin on some other fics.....IM WORKIN ON THEM!!! dont WORRY

FEEL FREE TO COMMENT AND SAY HI OR SCREAM AT ME ON TWITTER, [HERE'S](#)
THE PROMO POST, YEEHAW

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It wasn't bad, all things considered. It was certainly better than being pickled.

Yin Yu was actually surprised. He'd expected to be worked like an ox, ground into listlessness, to the point where he'd fall into bed every night and sink into unconsciousness almost instantly—waking the next morning to a list of new tasks and a fresh headache.

But maybe Hua Cheng hadn't been lying, saying that he could cut and run whenever he wanted, because he certainly wasn't giving him reasons to cut and run. Yin Yu had a room, a nice one, with a comfortable bed; Yin Yu had his own two ghost servants, who he could delegate tasks to when he wanted to. The work itself was surprisingly satisfying; he functioned mostly as a peace-keeping officer of sorts, a mediator, an intermediary between the ghosts and Hua Cheng. Hua Cheng seemed to have listened to his request not to do things that he found immoral, so he had a management role instead, and he liked it. The ghosts looked to him with the same fearful reverence that they afforded Hua Cheng; Yin Yu liked this, too. It had never been like this in the heavens—here, he wasn't plain Yin Yu, but rather the respected Waning Moon officer. He had power. It was nice.

What's more, when he gathered his courage and asked for a short break once or twice, Hua Cheng granted it; when he was cursed during a hunt by a troublesome ghost and couldn't leave his bed, Hua Cheng had sent two extra servants to wait on him; and when he asked for a favor, really the only one—to help dispel the soul of an old friend—Hua Cheng had come and aided him himself.

Deep down, Yin Yu knew the reason for the reasonable conditions and the occasional personal help; Hua Cheng understood how the mind worked, and this type of employment served its function better than any kind of tyrant's punishments at ensuring loyalty. If he'd had nothing to lose, maybe he'd easily betray Hua Cheng; but if it was like this, who could tempt him away with a more reasonable life?

Yin Yu thought about Quan Yizhen sometimes. He remembered how childish he'd thought he was, when he'd said that he didn't like working in the heavens. It was ironic that he'd been the one to get flung down, and even more ironic that he was starting to agree with what his former shidi had said.

But he couldn't think too long about Quan Yizhen. It made him upset and confused, and the generous amount of work to stabilize the nascent ghost city kept him occupied enough to forget about it.

Most days, it did.

As for his working relationship with Hua Cheng, however, it left him somewhat unsatisfied. It was incredibly cold, no matter how much time passed. Hua Cheng didn't "warm up" to him, or to anyone; they met, they exchanged information, and Yin Yu was given orders before being sent on his way. Occasionally, Hua Cheng would offer a lukewarm quip, and Yin Yu would turn to him expecting more; but nothing more came.

It was a bit disappointing to work for someone whose favor you couldn't win over, who wouldn't smile and appreciate you. It made Yin Yu a little bit lonely. He did make a few friends among the other ghost servants—not all of them were crazy—and many of the more vulnerable ghosts in the city were endlessly grateful to him, leaving him crumpled-up paper money and gifts of bizarre food; but

the lure of being esteemed by Hua Cheng was always there. Sometimes he let himself fantasize about it. Wouldn't it be nice, if Hua Cheng turned to him one day and said—Yin Yu, I'm actually grateful that you're here? Yin Yu, you have an impressive work ethic, Yin Yu, you've really helped me...

But deep down, Yin Yu knew that there was only one thing that Hua Cheng really wanted, that Hua Cheng would be grateful for. He just wasn't sure exactly what it was.

At least, until the incident with the spy.



The man cowered in his cell, his hands over his head. "Lord...My Lord, please, I...I didn't..."

Hua Cheng gazed at him coldly, his hands behind his back. "I won't ask again. Who sent you?"

"Nobody! I'm not, I never..."

"You were caught looking through my private documents. Lying won't help you now, but it'll make your death worse. Who sent you?"

Behind him, cloaked in shadow, Yin Yu eyed him Hua Cheng from beneath his mask. He was uneasy with this type of situation. Usually, he could forget the kind of person he worked for, the kind of place he was in, and pretend he was living a simple life as an administrator. A scene like this made him remember the truth, and he didn't like it.

"I—I didn't know they were your private things!" the man spluttered, crawling up on his knees to the cell bars. Both of his legs were broken. "I, I was only looking for, um—"

"I'm losing patience," Hua Cheng said, and turned his head just barely. "Waning Moon."

Yin Yu stepped forward. "Yes, Sir."

He held out a hand. "Knife."

Yin Yu handed over the knife from his belt. It was a cruel, jagged thing, made only to cause the most pain possible.

At the sight of it, the man trembled. "No no no no NO NO NO—"

But Hua Cheng stepped forward, merciless, and took the man by the collar, lifting him, dangling the broken legs beneath him. "I'll ask one more—"

Suddenly, the man whipped something out of his sleeve and doused Hua Cheng in murky water.

Yin Yu tensed in anticipation, but what happened next still made him jump; Hua Cheng let go, flicked one finger, and sent the man hurtling into the back wall of the cell. As the man crumpled, Hua Cheng wiped some of the water off his face and regarded his dripping fingers coldly.

"Poison?" he said, with a dangerous smile. "You think this would work on a Supreme?"

But man in the cell wasn't reacting like before. He drew himself up slowly, and his face was blank, utterly devoid of emotion.

Alarm bells sounded in Yin Yu's head, and he almost warned Hua Cheng; but Hua Cheng seemed to already have noticed, and a wave of killing intent made Yin Yu's head swim.

"Yes," the man said blankly. "It will work on a Supreme. It's made especially with that purpose in mind."

"Oh?" Hua Cheng said, the danger palpable in his voice. "Aren't you afraid to die?"

"This is a clone," said the man.

This was Yin Yu's first sign that something was truly, *gravely* wrong. Hua Cheng should be able to easily tell who was a clone. Either Hua Cheng had somehow failed, or the person who made this clone was—

"And what will this poison do to me?" Hua Cheng said, still unconcerned.

"It has the effect of revealing a ghost's motivations, the greatest desires at their core," the man said, just as blankly as before. "I don't aim to kill you. I just don't want you to get in my way."

"It was a good plan," Hua Cheng said smoothly. "It's always good to have leverage, very smart. However, I'm sorry to disappoint you. Your poison isn't working."

"It isn't yet," the man said, and snapped his fingers.

Hua Cheng stumbled—Yin Yu had never, *never* seen him stumble—and collapsed against a table, holding himself up just barely.

"Chengzhu!" Yin Yu shouted, and ran forward—

He felt a rain against his side; he'd been doused by the poison too!

But he wasn't a ghost. The clone in the cell hadn't expected that, and a pair of eyes burned into his back in curiosity as he took hold of Hua Cheng—

The decision was made in an instant. "Chengzhu, quick, come with me!"

Hua Cheng seemed to be holding back something dreadful, something that made him shake, clenching his teeth and curling his hands into fists—

"MY LORD, QUICKLY!"

And finally he let go and let himself be pulled away.

Yin Yu burst out the door, ghost king in tow, and dragged him down the hall—a ghost went past. "MILORD!" he gasped. "What's wrong with—"

In a rush, Yin Yu *slammed* the ghost against the wall and held a knife to his neck. "Tell NOBODY of this!" he barked. "Go, guard that room at the end of the hall, but *don't go in!* Understood?"

"Y-yes, Waning Moon, yes, please—!"

Quickly Yin Yu released him and ran back to Hua Cheng's side; the ghost king was now holding a hand over his mouth, as though trying to keep himself from saying something. No time to think about it; Yin Yu dragged him further and further, until—there, an ordinary room! He pulled him in and shut the door.

Hua Cheng curled on the floor, trembling. Yin Yu knelt at his side.

“My Lord, I need spiritual power to seal the—”

Reaching out, Hua Cheng practically crushed his wrist. Yin Yu gasped, feeling a turbulent flow of spiritual power go in.

“Thank you,” he choked, extracting his throbbing hand, and quickly drew a quick sign on the door. And soon enough—

The sounds from outside grew muffled, then disappeared.

Gasping, out of breath, Yin Yu backed away from the door, wiping sweat from his forehead. “All right, it's sealed,” he breathed. “No one can hear us now. Whatever you have to do, you can—”

A bloodcurdling *wail* rose from behind him, sending Yin Yu's heart into his throat, raising every single hair on the back of his neck:

“DIANXIAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!” Hua Cheng screamed out, the wild cry going raw halfway through.

Yin Yu whirled to him wide-eyed, only to find him clutching his head on the floor. “My Lord, what —”

“DIANXIAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

It was perhaps the most horrible sound Yin Yu had ever heard; it made him tremble wildly, the terror making his face hot. His breaths grew short, and he backed against the wall. “Um—my Lord? My Lord—what should I—”

“Your highness—your highness—” Hua Cheng sobbed, clawing at the rug. “Why can't I find you—why—why couldn't I—so *useless*—”

Another wave seemed to crawl up his shoulders, and he writhed and screamed out—

“WHERE ARE YOU?!”

“Shhh,” Yin Yu managed, holding out a hand. “My Lord—calm down, it's the poison, it's just the—”

“DIANXIAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!” Hua Cheng screamed out, inconsolable, his voice barely human, sounding like a man on the very verge of death. “PLEASE, PLEASE BE SAFE, I'M SORRY, I'M SORRY—!”

Yin Yu couldn't talk anymore; his teeth were chattering. It was too overwhelming, he felt like he might cry; instead, he sank to the ground and tossed away his mask, burying his head in his knees and trying to control his breathing. He didn't know what else to do.

Somewhere, though, his mind was working. As if he was outside his body, he looked down calmly at the scene; and he remembered, all of a sudden, one of the four great old stories passed around in the

heavens.

Yes, by the name and the fact of the cursed shackle, he knew who Hua Cheng was looking for; and by the sound of it, he knew roughly for what purpose. He just didn't know why.

As he was realizing this, though, he also noticed the screams had gone silent. Cautious, he looked up.

In the place where Hua Cheng had laid, there was now a small child, curled up on the ground, feverish and half-asleep.



Yin Yu walked down the hallway of paradise manor, his eyes blank. He held the child in his arms, the small head draped over his shoulder so nobody could see the tell-tale face.

Every so often, a ghost stopped him and smiled. "What a cute little one! Who is he?"

"From the streets," Yin Yu said numbly. "Saved by Chengzhu. Please excuse me."

"What a dear little thing! What's his name?"

"Not sure, he won't say. He's sleeping, let me through."

"Waning Moon? What's this, are you a babysitter now?"

"A task from Chengzhu. Pardon me."

He walked and walked, his mind a mess.

If the poison had worked on me, what would I have screamed out?

But his thoughts were interrupted by a voice—young, but cold—near his ear.

"Yin Yu."

"Chengzhu," he said, slowing to a stop. "You're awake."

"Report."

"After you were poisoned, I took you to a room and sealed it off. Only one ghost saw as I took you, but I ensured he wouldn't speak of it. In the room, you...shouted for some time, but no one heard, since I managed to seal it. You then turned into this form. I was taking you to your room, but if you want to go somewhere else, then—"

"You said that no one heard what I was shouting."

"...um...en, that's correct."

"But you heard."

Yin Yu didn't say anything.

“I must have mentioned someone, and you must know who it is.”

There was no point in obscuring the truth. Hua Cheng wasn’t accusing him, simply confirming what he already knew, so Yin Yu spoke. “His Highness, The Crown Prince of Xianle,” he said. “Xie Lian.”

The voice at his shoulder went silky with threat: “You know what happens to you if you tell anybody.”

Yin Yu was quiet for a few moments.

“You’re upset,” Hua Cheng noticed.

“Sir...” Yin Yu sighed. “With—with all due respect, I...wouldn’t. I really wouldn’t, and I don’t know why you think I would. I don’t think you’re a bad person, and you clearly don’t have bad intentions towards this person, it’s the opposite—so, why would I interfere and make someone get hurt?”

There was a humorless scoff. “Don’t pretend to be so simple-hearted.”

“My Lord, then—don’t, you also shouldn’t, either,” Yin Yu fumbled out. He was terrified to be talking back to him like this, and he’d certainly never done it before, but some things just had to be said. “You could’ve just told me, I, I would’ve...”

“I can’t have you looking for him,” Hua Cheng interrupted plainly. “It’s too conspicuous. If anyone knew I was looking for him, anyone could find him use him against me. You saw this just now.”

It was the closest that Hua Cheng had ever gotten to telling him that it wasn’t his fault, that it wasn’t because he didn’t trust him. To this, Yin Yu nodded quietly. “I understand.”

With that, there wasn’t much else to say, so he started walking again. He set the young form of Hua Cheng down in his room, received his orders to take over his duties for the next week, and nodded; but before he left, he paused by the door.

“What,” said Hua Cheng.

“Good luck, Chengzhu,” said Yin Yu, and fled before any response could be registered.



Yin Yu took over Hua Cheng’s duties for the next week.

He learned a little more about the ghost king’s role. He learned that when a ghost came seeking protection, not just refuge, Hua Cheng took the requests himself. He’d always heard him speak callously in public: “Ghost City isn’t a charity. Do whatever you want; just don’t expect my help.”

But then, what was this?

Yin Yu stood before the divan at the end of Paradise Manor’s main hall—it didn’t feel quite right to sit—and rifled through the documents in his hands.

The ghost before him trembled, her hands clasped in front of her. In the silence, she started talking.

“Lord Hua, Hua Chengzhu, said that...said that I should come back in a week, so...I don’t mean to be a burden, but the cultivator, he, he wouldn’t leave me alone, so...I...I didn’t mean to kill him—” Her voice choked into a sob. “I told Milord, I don’t have anywhere else to turn, I won’t cause trouble—”

Yin Yu raised his head from the papers. “You’ve been granted protection.”

Wiping away tears, the ghost sniffled. “What?”

“Chengzhu left orders before he departed for his mission. You’ve been given one of the small houses near the manor, it should be to your liking. The cultivator has been identified and his description has been distributed to the sentries. If you run into any trouble, you’re to show this token to any ghost.” Yin Yu held up a silver coin with a butterfly engraved. “Delivery of you and this token safely to Paradise Manor will be richly rewarded, so you shouldn’t have trouble finding help.”

The ghost’s eyes widened, and she trembled. “That...that’s...I...”

Yin Yu gathered up the papers, tapping them against the table to straighten them. “This should be sufficient. Chengzhu wishes you luck in your—”

“Wait!” she burst out. “I can’t repay this—what do I—?”

“Your continued loyalty is valued. Please stay out of trouble and contribute to the building up of Ghost City. Chengzhu wishes you luck in your endeavors.”

Her eyes shining, the ghost received her papers and the token before leaving with many bows and praises.

Behind his mask, Yin Yu watched her go. Then, he looked down. “Bring in the next one.”

“Yes, Sir!”

Yin Yu rifled through the next set of papers, reading through them. Then, he expelled a breath through his nose

Ghost City isn’t a charity, Chengzhu? he thought to himself, amused but also sad, suddenly feeling like the ghost king was a bit pitiful. *Then what’s this?*



Hua Cheng emerged from his room a week later, his form restored. The incident with the clone wasn’t mentioned for a while; it had turned into an empty skin when Yin Yu went back to inspect it, and there were no further leads.

However, one day, Yin Yu was summoned to Hua Cheng’s side, where the ghost king told him:

“I’ve found out who sent the clone.”

Surprised, Yin Yu stood up straight. “Who?”

“You’ll see,” Hua Cheng said. “Get your things together. We’re going to a housewarming party.”

Chapter End Notes

OOOOH I WONDER WHO IT IS???? HMMM WHO COULD IT BE

next chapter should come SOON!!!! it honestly writes itself, i ADORE yin yu.....my child.....

twitter promo post: [HERE!!!](#)

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Yin Yu had long learned something about Hua Cheng; behind the standoffish exterior, he had the tendency to be quite childish. If something amused him, he was more likely to engage with it; if it bored him, he wouldn't. Sometimes, the only way to get at least a cryptic answer was to ask the right cryptic question.

So when a second straightforward repetition of the *who* question had failed, as they sailed out onto murky waters, Yin Yu sighed and phrased it differently:

“What’s for dinner tonight?”

For a moment, he didn't get an answer. Hua Cheng's back was to him as he faced out into the sea, so he couldn't see his expression.

But then:

“Roasted fish,” said Hua Cheng, and Yin Yu's heart dropped.

It couldn't be—*him*?



When he'd found out about Black Water Sinking Ships, he'd still been a god. It had been brought up at a general meeting by Jun Wu, in those days when he'd lived surrounded by refined and glittering heavenly officials—always feeling lower, strange, out of place.

“Surely many of you have already heard,” Jun Wu said calmly, “A new supreme emerged a few months ago. Among the ghosts, a new name has recently arisen for him. This name is based on—”

“Shixiong, shixiong,” Quan Yizhen said to him, tugging on his sleeve. “I'm bored. Let's go spar.”

Yin Yu sighed heavily. “Shh, let me hear.”

Quan Yizhen fell silent, and Yin Yu caught the next snippet:

“It's unclear what his purpose is. His capabilities are also unclear; thus far, no heavenly official has faced him. In the case of—”

“Shixiong.”

Yin Yu fought down a wave of annoyance and turned to him. “What?”

“How come we all have to sit around and hear about this ghost? Can't we just go kill it?”

Typical. “No. You can’t just go kill a ghost if there’s no reason to.”

“Why not?”

Yin Yu felt a headache coming on. “You just can’t. Quiet, let me listen.”

“But I don’t get it.”

Seeing no other recourse, Yin Yu lowered his voice and explained: “The ghosts have their own matters to take care of. As long as they don’t interfere with the heavens, they can be left alone.”

“Oh,” said Quan Yizhen, and thought about it. “But aren’t ghosts bad?”

“They can be, but humans and gods can be bad too, and we don’t kill all of them. Now, I need to listen—”

But he suddenly realized that everyone was chatting amongst themselves now. Jun Wu’s speech had ended, and he’d missed all of it.

He sighed. At least Quan Yizhen seemed to have gotten bored of the topic and wandered off, no doubt looking for more snacks.

Yin Yu picked at his plate glumly with his chopsticks, and was just thinking about asking Jian Yu about the contents of the speech—he’d had the good sense to sit a bit farther away—when Yin Yu suddenly felt a pair of eyes boring into him.

Raising his head slightly, he met the gaze of the official next to him.

Ming Yi, the most recently ascended heavenly official, had a grave face and manner which earned him few friends. Now, though, his blank stare was trained on Yin Yu.

“Um, hi,” Yin Yu said, giving an awkward bow of his head. “Sorry, I don’t think we’ve met. I’m—”

“Pass me that,” said Ming Yi, pointing to his side.

Of course he hadn’t been looking for an introduction. With a sigh, Yin Yu turned to find a plate of sea grapes. He picked it up and passed it over.

Ming Yi took it from him and immediately buried his face in the bowl, seeming to forget his existence entirely.

But when he stood and turned to leave, Yin Yu could’ve sworn he felt a pair of dark eyes on his back again.



Now, Yin Yu stood behind Hua Cheng, miserably wringing out his sleeve. He was sore and damp all over; if he’d had any doubts about who they were coming to visit, the way their ship had been sucked

into the sea like a mere piece of driftwood more than confirmed it.

Hua Cheng, on the other hand, looked fine and dry as he stood in front of the manor—if slightly bored.

“I know you’re in there,” he said. “Come out.”

Nothing.

Hua Cheng picked up a stone and flung it at the stone nether manor. It bounced off.

“My Lord,” Yin Yu said nervously. “Perhaps he isn’t—”

“He’s in there,” Hua Cheng said lazily. “Black Water, come out. I won’t even kill you, I’m feeling merciful.”

Still nothing.

Hua Cheng went on: “Your trick was stupid, but I found it amusing. I have an antidote now, so it won’t work again. Didn’t you want to meet me? Come out.”

Dead silence.

“I can wait here all day,” said Hua Cheng. “Though, that fact that I was able to come this far means you aren’t trying very hard to impede me, so I know you want to hear what I have to say. And if you were trying to test me with those bone fish, you’re considering me for something else, too.”

He smiled fakely.

“Don’t you have a list of enemies you’re working through? It’s so obvious, anyone can tell. If only a kind supreme ghost king showed up, right at your door, hoping to help you in exchange for a favor or two. What a shame...”

And all of a sudden, a grim voice sounded from the air all around them, and echoed:

“Who’s the person with you.”

Unperturbed, Hua Cheng looked back towards Yin Yu. “Show your face.”

Feeling useless, Yin Yu reached up and pushed his mask to the side, adjusting it so it rested over the right side of his head. Then, he looked up.

There was a moment of silence which almost felt like contemplation.

Then, the door of Black Water Manor swung open, and a tall, dark-robed figure stepped out, suffusing the air around him with a cold and tenebrous aura.

His face was hidden behind a mask in the shape of a water dragon.

But Hua Cheng gave his fake smile again. “I see. So it’s true, what I thought.”

“And what is that,” said Black Water, after a long pause.

“Why the mask? I certainly wouldn’t recognize you, so it’s this one you’re afraid of.” Hua Cheng nodded his head towards Yin Yu. “You two must have met, at least in passing. And if I think back to

the god who ascended at *about* a decade after Mount Tonglu's last opening, then..."

Hua Cheng made a show of counting on his fingers, but Black Water was already reaching for his mask. "Insufferable," he muttered darkly, and removed it.

Yin Yu's pupils shrank.

Ming ... Yi?

No...not quite. Whoever this was, he looked even colder and grimmer, thinner, sharp-eared, and taller by no small measure. But the resemblance was striking. It couldn't be anyone else.

With a malevolent smile curling across his face, Hua Cheng bowed deeply. "Black Water Sinking Ships. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Yin Yu didn't bow so deeply, but did nod once. He wondered what to say for a moment—*good to see you again? It really wasn't*—so in the end, he said nothing.

It was just as well. Black Water didn't say anything, either.

Straightening out of the bow, Hua Cheng tilted his head. "Oh. I'd expected a warmer greeting."

"What do you want," said Black Water, venomously.

"We're the only two supreme-level calamities around. I think we should be friends."

Black Water narrowed his eyes. "Shut up. Speak clearly."

"Well, I can't do both."

"Choose one."

Hua Cheng smiled wide and said nothing.

A sense of foreboding crawled up the back of Yin Yu's neck. He had one of those moments, which still came occasionally, where he realized how strange and terrifying his situation was: there he was, pathetic and insignificant Yin Yu, standing awkwardly between the two titans of the ghost world as they traded barbs. He really couldn't fathom why Hua Cheng had brought him. Was it because he knew Black Water would recognize him? Was he just an adornment, a trophy symbolizing Hua Cheng's triumphs over heaven?

Or had Hua Cheng kept in mind how he'd helped him, in the face of Black Water's last trick?

He didn't know, and he didn't have time to think about it further; because at that moment—

Black Water lifted his hand, and a snake-like column of water shot up from the murky lake in the center of the clearing.

With a smile that bared his teeth, Hua Cheng drew his scimitar.

Oh shit oh *shit*—

Yin Yu barely had time to dive out of the way, smacking hard to the ground with his hands over his head, as a deadly whip of water went *whistling* over his head. It would've smacked into Hua Cheng,

but the ghost king jumped up savagely, flinging out a rain of butterflies which surged forward in a wave towards Black Water.

The quiet atmosphere was suddenly filled with noise; wave after wave of water whipped towards Hua Cheng, who only chuckled as he dodged and dodged, blocking when it was inevitable with soaring columns of silver butterflies. The din of roaring water and heavy splashes, the screaming and shearing of butterflies, and the scrape of deadly blades filled Yin Yu's ears—

"Fuck," Yin Yu hissed through his teeth, pulling his eyes away. It was true that neither of the ghost kings were using their full powers; they were sparring, testing each other, playing; but a situation like this wasn't safe for Yin Yu. He'd used up his last dregs of Hua Cheng's allowance of spiritual power in order to avoid drowning on the way to the island, and other than a sword and a knife strapped to him, he was now essentially powerless.

Keeping low to the ground—nobody was paying him any attention, and he was grateful for it—he began crawling forward on his elbows, stopping and covering his head every time a might *crash!* sounded nearby. Sometimes, he couldn't even tell what was hitting what, or even how far it was—he just knew that he had to keep moving, and—there! Up ahead, there was an enormous rock, the perfect size to hide behind!

His eyes shining with relief, he stopped and gave one last glance back to make sure that his way would be clear.

When he did, though, his heart dropped; because Black Water met his gaze.

Then, Black Water slowly turned towards him. Hua Cheng followed the action with his eyes and raised his brows.

No no no NO NO NO—

Yin Yu slapped an open palm to the ground, pushing himself to his feet, and scrambled to get behind the rock, when—

A whip of water yanked his ankle out from under him, and then dragged him—*UP!*

Yin Yu was jolted into the air by one leg. At first, he gasped and squeezed his eyes shut, but his stomach dropped as he felt himself rising, rising, rising—oh no, anything but this—

He opened his eyes to the sight of the ground dropping away far below him.

Immediately he closed his eyes again, *don't look!* But in that moment, mindlessly struggling against the whip, he twisted, and his ankle slipped out, and—

Perfect, just perfect, Yin Yu! Now you're hurtling towards the ground!

Yin Yu couldn't help it; he let out a wild shout as he plummeted down, bile rising in his throat—

Then, a painful pull on his leg—another whip of water had caught him. He had no time to rest, though, because the whip soon tensed back and threw him careening through the air, straight into the grip of another—

Seeing a flash of red, Yin Yu understood what was happening: Hua Cheng was chasing him. Every time he got too close, though, Yin Yu was thrown helplessly around by Black Water like a rag doll into the hold of another waiting tendril of water.

“Give him back,” he heard Hua Cheng say, almost lazily. “You should play fair.”

“You brought him to my territory.”

“Not as a housewarming gift.”

With the lull in being flung around, though dangling by a crushing grip around his waist, Yin Yu managed to yell: “CHENGZHU!”

Hua Cheng didn’t move his eyes from Black Water, but he responded: “I see you. Don’t struggle, just hold still.”

But how could he not struggle? Writhing in the whip’s hold, Yin Yu shouted out again, terror and temper blending into desperation: “GET—ME—OUT OF—!”

“Don’t interrupt,” Black Water said stonily; and all of a sudden, the whip around Yin Yu’s waist was curling up—and there was water all around his face.

For the next minute, Yin Yu genuinely had no idea what was going on. His face was covered in brackish water, which he gulped in once or twice by accident; the salt burned his eyes, his throat, his nose; and he was tossed here and there, sometimes tumbling through the air, sometimes being yanked forcefully around.

His mind was empty; the only thought was not drowning. He tried once to slide his mask back over his face and push in, hoping to block the horrible, salty liquid, but the effect was more like waterboarding, so he clawed it off and shoved it aside again—just in time to gasp in another rush of water. He was drowning, he was really drowning, why him?! Yin Yu’s spirits couldn’t get any lower. A banished god, being batted around like a toy by two ghost kings—no, no time to think about it. Where was Hua Cheng? He had to find Hua Cheng—

Once, and only once, he felt a hand close around his wrist, and he clung to it—

But it slipped away, and he was hurtled in some other direction—

Until finally, something changed.

Thwap! Another whip shot around his waist, and held him unusually steady. Panting, coughing up water, Yin Yu felt a bit relieved.

But then, he looked down to see a tentacle.

His eyes widened. He looked back, tracing the tentacle, and oh, oh *no*—an enormous water demon, surely under the command of Black Water—a monster the size of the entire nether water manor—was slowly emerging from the ocean in a mass of writhing tentacles.

Yin Yu went white, as another tentacle wrapped around his wrist. Then, he turned around and shouted —

“CHENGZHU!”

He saw a blur of red, and Hua Cheng was soaring up towards him. His face was unreadable, as he cut through a flurry of tentacles that shot towards him; but he was going too slow. Yin Yu was being pulled away.

“LORD—CHENG—ZHU!” Yin Yu shouted again, as another tentacle curled around his neck. At this rate, he was going to be pulled straight into the ocean, why him, why this—why couldn’t he have just let the ghosts pickle him that first time in the makeshift ghost city and gotten it over with?! Or why hadn’t he escaped and faced the angry, descended deputy heavenly officials, or why couldn’t he have just bashed his head in, before any of this happened—

Or why couldn’t he have just fucking *talked* to Quan Yizhen before he—!

The tentacle around his neck was choking him, but he couldn’t reach it, since his arms were strapped down too. Oh well, this was it. He was going to die.

At the thought of that, though, he was filled with fury, roaring *fury!* Like *hell* he was going to die in a stupid, useless way like this—and so, he filled his lungs:

“CHENGZHU!” Yin Yu shouted, boiling with rage. “IF YOU LET ME DIE HERE, I’LL—I’LL—”

Hua Cheng chopped through two more tentacles, keeping a steady eye on him.

“—I’LL *QUIT!*”

Hua Cheng raised a brow.

Black Water stared.

Then, all of a sudden, the tentacles had withdrawn, and Yin Yu was falling.

Oh shit oh shit oh SHIT—!

Hua Cheng leapt up and caught him; the force of the impact made Yin Yu spit out a mouthful of seawater, coughing and hacking. The misery only served to increase his rage, and he was about to *really* give him a piece of his mind—

But then Hua Cheng slung him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, opened his umbrella, and drifted gently back down. Yin Yu closed his eyes against a wave of dizziness as the ghost king landed with a graceful *tip* of his shoes, closing his umbrella.

“Put me *down!*” Yin Yu tried to say, but instead he coughed up another mouthful of seawater down Hua Cheng’s back, staining the red robe with brackish water. Served him right.

“I wasn’t going to kill him,” Black Water said grimly.

Hua Cheng snorted. “Okay. Do you know how hard it is to find another servant like this, if he quits?”

“I didn’t know he could leave. I thought he was your slave.”

“Uh huh.”

Black Water glared. “I wouldn’t have started sparring if I knew I could owe you something at the end.”

That was *it!* Yin Yu was *so* done with this entire *fucking* situation, being treated like a pawn in this stupid game, and he started struggling furiously over Hua Cheng’s shoulder. “You know *what?*” he seethed. “I’ve *had* it with this. I’ve decided, I actually—”

“Yin Yu,” Hua Cheng said.

Yin Yu bit the inside of his cheek, trying to suppress his furious trembling.

“You can have the next month off.”

That startled him. He hung over Hua Cheng’s shoulder pitifully for a moment, thinking. Then, he turned his head a little.

“...paid?”

“En.”

“...”

“...”

“...”

“...Yes, Chengzhu.”

Hua Cheng lifted him off his shoulder and set him standing, waiting to let go until Yin Yu had regained his footing on wobbly legs. Then, he crossed his arms and clicked his tongue.

“Now I’ve been set back by a month’s wages, not good.”

Black Water glowered. “You’ve got money. Just pay it.”

“I meant, not good for you. I’ve added it to your debt.”

“My debt.”

“Don’t glare at me, it won’t help. Plus, it’s rude. Why don’t we put aside our differences and settle on a deal that works for both of us?”

Black Water humphed. “...what do you want.”

“I help you with your revenge list,” Hua Cheng said with a smile, “And you pass me information from the heavens. Isn’t that easy? You’ve already got it full of spies, all you have to do is hand it over.”

For a few moments, Black Water stared at him.

Hua Cheng stared back.

Yin Yu was getting nervous again, and besides that, his head was still spinning from being tossed around. He felt his stomach do a flip, and a cold sweat rose to his forehead.

“Ah, I get it,” Hua Cheng said. “You want to know my ultimate goal. Isn’t this convenient? I want to know yours, too.”

Black Water’s eyes narrowed.

Hua Cheng’s smile widened.

Yin Yu was having a little bit of trouble standing, and he rubbed his forehead. So queasy...

"I'll give it to you," Hua Cheng said, holding up two fingers. "If you trade."

Black Water considered it for a moment.

Then, he swept forward, his robes billowing around him—and he held two fingers up, touching them to Hua Cheng's.

Then, after a minute, they both drew their hands back. When Hua Cheng opened his eyes, he laughed. "Now *that's* an interesting story."

In contrast, though, when Black Water opened his eyes, he looked almost baffled.

"...that's it," he said.

"En." Hua Cheng nodded. "That's it."

"Hmph," Black Water muttered. "You really are—"

Yin Yu fell to his knees and threw up.

"..."

"..."

One and a half pairs of eyes turned to him as he coughed and retched onto the ground, truly the very image of wretchedness. Then, Hua Cheng heaved a sigh.

"Black Water, look what you did."

"He's a heavenly official. He's fine."

"He has a cursed shackle, idiot, you can't just do whatever to him."

"Then take him home." Black Water turned and went up the steps. "We'll settle the details later."

And with that—bam, the door of the manor was closed.

Yin Yu could care less, still panting, splayed out on all fours. With his head down like this, the world was spinning a little less, so he didn't move.

"Yin Yu."

"Ugh," Yin Yu groaned.

Hua Cheng chuckled at that. Then, Yin Yu saw Hua Cheng's hand in the corner of his vision, offering him a water gourd.

Yin Yu squeezed his eyes shut and turned his head away. "No," he mumbled.

"It's not salt water."

Fine. Yin Yu reached over and took it clumsily, rinsed his mouth with a large swig, and then spat.



The journey back was silent at first. A little boat cut through the waters, held up from sinking by a bone fish on either side.

Hua Cheng stood at the bow, gazing on ahead. Yin Yu was slumped in the back.

To his faint surprise, it was actually Hua Cheng who broke the silence:

“That didn’t go quite as planned.”

It took a few seconds of suppressing a furious *Oh?! You think so, Sir?!* before Yin Yu had the patience to grasp the meaning: I didn’t want that to happen to you.

Remembering his own words, Yin Yu actually felt a little bad. After a cough, he stammered.

“I, I also, um...Sir, what I said back then...” He sighed. “When I’m upset, I say things I don’t mean. I wasn’t actually going to quit.”

Hua Cheng shrugged. “It’s all the same to me. I told you, I don’t expect loyalty.”

“I know,” Yin Yu said quietly.

The rush of water filled the silence.

“...you don’t actually have to give me a month off,” Yin Yu ventured.

“No, no. A deal is a deal. It’s on Black Water’s tab, in any case.”

At that, Yin Yu actually snickered. Then, he closed his eyes and leaned his head back wearily. He wanted a stupid answer, and to get one, he knew he had to ask a stupid question; so he thought.

Then—“Sir.”

“What.”

“...what should I do on my month off?”

For a moment, Hua Cheng didn’t answer. Then, he turned his head back slightly.

“Don’t go swimming. You’re not very good at it.”



When he went to his private room in the ghost city bath-house, scrubbing at his skin and hair until all the seaweed and muck and salt dyed the water green, Yin Yu *swore* to avoid Black Water like the

plague. Who knew that the innocuous, grim Ming Yi was a mask for a character like this?! Just thinking about how many times he'd sat next to him made him shudder. He'd passed him a plate of *sea grapes*.

But, just his luck, the promise wouldn't hold. The time would come when he had to interact directly with Black Water again.

This time, however, the consequences would be much worse.

Chapter End Notes

OH NO WHAT'S GONNA HAPPEN?? BETTER WAIT AND FIND OUT....

THANK U to AO3 user [CountingSockets](#) who inspired the roasted fish line at the beginning with this incredible comment



[CountingSockets](#) on [Fortune's Fool](#)

1 day ago

CHENGZHU SIR, ALL IS WELL!!!!

grabs lighter and gasoline LET'S ROAST FISH SIR.



Reply

☐ Select

AND THANK U ALL FOR THE SUPPORT SO FAR!!! yin yu fics aren't the most popular but yall rllly warming my heart out here with ur love for our poor son, know that every kind word goes RIGHT into my 心

update promo post on twitter: [HERE](#)

NEXT UPDATE HOPEFULLY SOON BYE BYE

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There was little that Yin Yu found genuinely unnerving, at this point. The years he'd spent serving Hua Cheng had given him experience; day in and day out, the bony, creeping, whispering masses of ghost city came to him for their business. The gory and the blood-stained, the misshapen and the tragic—and the beautiful ones, who were often the most frightening of all—didn't faze him as they once had. "Please move your stand from the road," Yin Yu would say calmly, to the hulking man missing half his head. He'd seen worse; at least he still had the one half.

And yet.

Black Water was *creepy*.



Yin Yu walked along a bustling ghost-city market, his mask on, his steps sure. The crowd parted before him, whispering amongst themselves, eyeing him, as always—all except for one little ghost boy, rolling his ball in the middle of the street.

But Yin Yu didn't kick him aside, of course; instead, he stopped in front of him, gazing down, hoping he wouldn't scare the child away with his mask. "Hello," he said. "Are you lost?"

The boy giggled, offering him his ball.

With a hidden smile, Yin Yu took it from him and tossed it aimlessly. The child scrambled after it like a dog, into the grassy area where it had rolled, and found it again. Brushing off the dirt, he held it up and grinned towards Yin Yu.

Yin Yu moved towards him, holding out a hand for the ball. "Give it back, let's see you catch it again."

This was one of the things he really liked, in all honesty. Someone like Yin Yu didn't have much to look forward to that was truly fulfilling, apart from a warm meal and a comfortable rest; but children sometimes found his mask silly, and he secretly liked it. Fearful awe from the ghosts was okay, but he preferred the people who didn't know who he was, who didn't find him threatening.

So he froze when the child suddenly looked up at him fixedly, all emotion wiping away. Immediately, the expression on the tiny face went blank.

"Report for Crimson Rain," the child said in a deep voice, and Yin Yu let his open hand fall limp.

Oh. Another clone.

Again.



Yin Yu sat in a chair, looking a little glum. One arm was stretched out, the hand fitted through a hole in a wooden frame. On the other side of this makeshift pillory, he could feel Hua Cheng tapping at his cursed shackle with something.

This was something Hua Cheng did fairly often, in that particular time. He'd taken to scouring his massive library for material on how to remove cursed shackles, and he often liked to experiment different methods on Yin Yu.

He didn't have to explain why he was doing it, of course; Yin Yu knew.

It made him feel complicated. On the one hand, he was glad to be useful to Hua Cheng in something concrete. On the other hand, there was something strange about it, like a prince's clothing being tailored on the body of a servant.

Right now, though, Yin Yu wasn't thinking all that much about it. He was only staring ahead, mentally running through his list of tasks for the next day, when he remembered: "...oh, right... Chengzhu, there's a new report from Black Water."

Black Water rarely used Hua Cheng's spiritual communication array. Instead, he sent one of his tens of clones to greet Yin Yu—and Yin Yu absolutely *hated* it. He never knew when or where a ghost would drop whatever facade it was occupying, and take on that eerie blankness that made Yin Yu feel sick to his stomach.

Yin Yu had tried lightly suggesting that Hua Cheng change his spiritual password, so Black Water could just *talk* to him, but it was useless; so it was up to Yin Yu to be approached by the unnerving clones.

"When," said Hua Cheng.

"Today."

"Oh," Hua Cheng replied. Yin Yu couldn't see his expression, on the other side of the wooden slab. "What did he say?"

"Um...nothing much, Sir. General Nan Yang took a new deputy...Jun Wu is off doing something, he doesn't know what...someone stole one of Wind Master's robes, she's pretty angry about it...oh, right, and Qi Rong is acting up again."

"So he's challenging the heavens now."

"No, he actually attacked Black Water's lair. He made it pretty far in, since Black Water wasn't there at the time."

"Hmn." Yin Yu felt his hand being turned over by Hua Cheng, and something else was tapping on the other side of his shackle. "Next time you see Black Water, tell him I can send someone to deal with that trash for him."

"And you'll add it to his debt."

“And I’ll add it to his debt.”

Yin Yu sighed and held still for a few more seconds, not really thinking about anything, before he felt something odd near his shackle. Something thin and a bit sharp was held against his wrist, almost like it was testing his skin.

“...um...excuse me, Sir?” Suddenly, Yin Yu felt a little queasy. “...um, I can’t really see from here, but...if this one may ask, what are you doing with my hand?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

WITH AN ANSWER LIKE THAT, HOW COULD HE NOT WORRY?

“Sir? What’s this wooden thing for, I can’t see my hand—wait, is this just here to block me from seeing...?” He went pale. “My Lord, it couldn’t be that you plan to—”

“I said, don’t worry about it.”

“MY LORD?” Yin Yu jumped up, trying frantically to pull his hand out of the space. “MY LORD, ARE YOU GOING TO CUT OFF MY HAND?”

“Stop freaking out.”

“MY LORD, PLEASE LET ME OUT OF THIS *RIGHT* NOW OR—I’LL QUIT, I’LL REALLY QUIT! THIS TIME I MEAN IT, I SWEAR I’LL—”

“Oh,” Hua Cheng acknowledged, and released it.

But Yin Yu had still been pulling, bracing his shoe against it to try yanking himself out; so when it released all of a sudden, Yin Yu stumbled—



Yin Yu sat at a ghost city inn, hunched over, his chin sunk deep in his hands. The position made his mask crooked, making the expression of it seem even funnier, but the humor was lost on him.

He looked down miserably at the bandages around his leg for the tenth time.

As it turned out, Hua Cheng hadn’t been about to chop off his hand, but rather just lightly scratch at the skin near the shackle; but when Yin Yu had blurted out his threat and was abruptly released, he’d fallen over and shattered his kneecap.

Hua Cheng had nonchalantly said, “Oh, it broke,” like Yin Yu’s joint was a teacup that fell off a shelf, and picked him up to carry him to the nearest ghost doctor; but Yin Yu begged him not to take him, knowing intimately what kind of malpractice went on in ghost city. So instead, Hua Cheng had deposited him in his room and tossed him a medicinal potion. Then—

“You think too much,” Hua Cheng had said, and then left.

So now, after a painful process of healing and bandaging, Yin Yu was slouched over the table at his favorite ghost city establishment. Since it served some of the heavenly officials who secretly came secretly to visit, the food was not only normal—it was *good*, and the sweet rice balls were especially good. Just thinking about the soft and sweet little glutinous rice balls, in pink and white and green, suspended in a cold and refreshing cream with a *drop* of honey over the top...

Yin Yu was sitting there, daydreaming about it, when the ghost waiter came back over with a tray held aloft.

“Waning Moon,” the waiter said, nodding his head graciously.

His expression brightening behind the mask, Yin Yu looked up. “Oh, thank you—”

But the waiter leaned over, his face going blank. “Report for Crimson Rain.”

OH, FOR FUCK 'S—!

“What,” said Yin Yu, miserably.

“Another attack from Night-Touring Green Lantern. I was not present. He reached a *li*’s distance from the manor.”

Yin Yu sighed. “Chengzhu told me to inform you that, should you need it, he’s willing to send someone to deal with it.”

If possible, the flat expression on the waiter’s face turned even flatter as he spoke: “And he’ll add it to my debt.”

“And he’ll add it to your debt.”

“Fine,” said the Black Water clone. Pasting the polite expression back on his face, he turned to go.

“Wait!” Yin Yu said. “Can I at least have my—”

Black Water set down the plate from the tray and then left. Yin Yu looked down.

It was empty. He’d eaten it.

Yin Yu deflated like an empty balloon. Soon, though, he raised his hand to order another one. Good thing Hua Cheng wasn’t cheap on his salary; for this, Yin Yu quietly thanked him and forgave him.



Yin Yu sat across from Hua Cheng at a table, with an assortment of dice spread out between them.

Hua Cheng held Yin Yu’s wrist for a few moments, concentrating, and then let go. “Try now.”

Yin Yu picked up a pair of dice and rolled, letting the dice clack to the table. Two fours.

“Hm.” Hua Cheng gripped again, a little tighter, and then released. “Again.”

One four, one six.

“Oh, that’s pretty good, Sir,” Yin Yu remarked.

“Not really. Again.”

As they repeated it, Yin Yu suddenly sighed and remembered: “Ah...I forgot to mention, Black Water agreed to the reinforcements.”

“Hmph. Weak.”

You’re calling Black Water weak? Yin Yu thought morosely. Then where does that leave me?

“So...will you send them, My Lord?”

“Mhm, tell him next time. Three ghosts, wrath level. More than enough.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Roll again.”

Casting the dice down, Yin Yu looked over—and his eyes widened. “...two sixes?”

“Promising, but it could be your luck interfering. Let’s try one more—”

But all of a sudden, without any warning, Yin Yu’s hand burst into flames!



Yin Yu leaned gloomily against a wall near Paradise Manor, his arms crossed, waiting for a delivery. One hand was now bandaged in addition to the leg.

The fire had come from seemingly nowhere. Yin Yu had been caught completely off guard, only gasping and trying to scramble back—but how could he scramble back from his own hand? It was Hua Cheng who had firmly gripped his wrist, plucked Yin Yu’s own water gourd off his waist, and proceeded to douse the fire. By then, though, the damage was done.

Well, at least he’d gotten a bonus out of it, enough to replace the singed sleeve of his robe, and then... maybe go back to that one inn, and have some delicious—

All of a sudden, he spotted someone watching him from across the street. He looked up.

A ghost maiden caught his eye and then shyly looked away, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

Yin Yu quickly looked away too, making sure his mask wasn’t facing her; but he could still feel her gaze on him.

When Yin Yu glanced over again, the maiden blushed and turned away again. How delicate.

He was used to being stared at in ghost city, but usually, it wouldn't be so direct; so finally, he sighed and spoke up.

"Miss," Yin Yu said. "Do you need something?"

She looked up, her eyes wide.

At once, alarm bells went off in his head. He turned back, glancing at the building he was leaning against. Wait a minute. Wasn't this...this part of ghost city, wasn't this the—?!

But it was too late; the young lady was dashing across the street. "Waning Moon," she gasped. "I...I didn't think you'd..."

"Wait, Miss," he stammered out. "This is a misunderstanding; I'm waiting for a flower deliverOH? MISS, THERE'S NO NEED TO—"

She'd tried to yank him into the alley by the side of the brothel, her sweet face pinched in guilt. "It's okay! I won't tell anyone, I won't even charge you, it's just that...you're so...I've just...I've always wanted to..."

Yin Yu's face went so hot that it felt sticky behind the mask. "Miss, I, I really think we shouldn't—it isn't right, it isn't a good idea—Miss—"

Her delicate, trembling hands gripped his wrist as she successfully dragged him into the alley, away from the street—

Yin Yu grew still, his eyes widening—

Then, all of a sudden, she leaned forward—and in deep voice, said quietly into his ear:

"Report for Crimson Rain."



Yin Yu stared sourly into the wall of the workroom.

He was sitting across from Hua Cheng, splayed out in a posture that made it clear that he was in a *very* bad mood. His wrist with the cursed shackle laid on the work table between him and the ghost king; the skin of his hand and wrist were pierced with tens of long, thin acupuncture needles, which jutted out like a porcupine's spines.

Yet, Yin Yu just stared bitterly ahead.

Checking against his book, Hua Cheng slowly inserted another needle. Then, he spoke: "You're not talkative today."

"There isn't anything to report, Sir," said Yin Yu, a little tartly.

"No recent meetings with Black Water, then."

“Actually, I saw him today.”

“Mmn,” Hua Cheng acknowledged. He had a magnifying lens to his eye, as he checked the position of a needle. “What did he say.”

“Why doesn’t he just come and tell you himself, ah?” Yin Yu snapped.

Hua Cheng paused.

Then, he started to look up—

Breaking out in a cold sweat, Yin Yu stammered. “I, I, I mean—“ He swallowed hard, not daring to look over. “Er, Chengzhu, my deepest apologies. I meant to say, he said he received your reinforcements. And um, some other preparations are ready.”

“Which ones.”

“A tyrant he’s been trying to track down...he’d said you’d know which one. He said his preparations are done, so you can send over the package he requested whenever it’s ready.”

“I’ll leave it to you to determine when it’s ready. You’ll deliver it to Black Water Manor.”

“...” Yin Yu wailed in his heart, but nodded obediently. “...yes, Sir.”

Hua Cheng carefully pulled out a needle.

Yin Yu’s brow furrowed. “...wait, I’ll determine whether it’s ready? What’s the package?”

“You,” said Hua Cheng. “He’s been asking me for some time to lend you to him, so that you can help him kill this particular tyrant. It’s in your former territory, so you should be familiar with the location.”

Yin Yu almost spat blood. “I—I—I’m going with him, My Lord?!”

“Stop moving around. Careful with the needles.”

“But—but—”

“You’ll only accompany him, you won’t kill. I’ve also laid down a set of rules for him about you. I was very clear.”

What kind of torture was this? Was this a punishment? Yin Yu couldn’t help it; he gave Hua Cheng a woeful look.

“Is there a problem,” said Hua Cheng, not even sparing him a glance as he pulled out another needle.

“...no, Chengzhu.”



Yin Yu stared up at the entrance of the Nether Water manor, his mask pushed to the side, blinking saltwater out of his eyes. “Lord Black Water,” he greeted.

A blank stare, framed by currents of lank, black hair, gazed coolly down at him. Not a clone this time; the original.

This would be fun.



The room was *horrible*.

Black Water showed him grimly to a room that was dark and slightly damp, echoing with the occasional sound of something dripping from the ceiling; it was clear that it flooded semi-regularly, who knows when. Yin Yu didn’t know, and he didn’t want to find out.

More horrible, however, was the fact of the furnishings: wood being obviously impractical in a place so damp, Black Water manor instead had stone furniture. So when Yin Yu set his small traveling-bag down on the bed, it landed with a *clunk*.

He winced at the sound, and *desperately* wanted to go home.

Behind him, either ignoring or oblivious to his misery, Black Water stared. “You will stay here one night,” he said coolly. “We will discuss the plan tonight. We leave tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, Lord Black Water.”

“Crimson Rain said you require food.”

“...yes, that’s correct,” Yin Yu said lamely. He felt like a dog being left at someone else’s house.

“Come.”

So Yin Yu followed him.

He’d almost expected to be led to a bowl on the floor, but instead, he was surprised to be led to the dining room; and he was even more surprised when he saw that there were dishes laid out on the table. With a careful glance up Black Water, who was staring at him like a dead fish, Yin Yu coughed and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Would, ah, My Lord like me to...?”

“Sit.”

Yin Yu sat. Black Water sat opposite to him.

Looking around at the plates, Yin Yu felt a little lost. He didn’t recognize almost anything, and was about to ask, when Black Water reached out and slowly pushed a plate towards him.

“...ah, thank you,” Yin Yu said politely, and pulled it towards him before looking down. He saw some type of diced-up cubes, like the kind of meat he might eat normally, except these were black. Assuming it was some kind of exotic fish, due to the salty scent that rose up from it, Yin Yu picked up his chopsticks and poked at it.

“...”

“...”

But this atmosphere, it was just too...

Giving a forced, polite laugh, Yin Yu picked up one of the dark cubes with his chopsticks. “Haha, um...if this servant may be so brave as to comment, it’s a bit funny, how we used to dine at the same table in the heavens...and now—”

“Eat,” Black Water interrupted, staring him down.

Yin Yu stopped short. Not sure what to say, he shoved the cube of fish into his mouth and chewed.

And chewed, and chewed, and chewed. It was kind of difficult to chew, and tasted decidedly gamey; Yin Yu was having trouble with it, his brow furrowing as he worked at it.

Black Water’s eyes narrowed. “What’s wrong.”

Politely hiding his mouth behind his hand, Yin Yu spoke: “Sorry, this...this fish is a little tough... what kind is it?”

“It’s not a fish. It’s a water ghou.”

Yin Yu choked and spat it back into the bowl.

“It provides spiritual energy,” Black Water said darkly. “You need to eat it for tomorrow’s journey.”

Suppressing a violent urge to gag, Yin Yu strained out a smile. “...oh, please don’t worry about me, My Lord. I saved enough from Hua Chengzhu’s allowance of spiritual powers to me, it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Fine,” said Black Water. He then suddenly reached out—

Yin Yu froze—

But Black Water just took the bowl, picked up his own chopsticks, and calmly began devouring it.

Ignoring the queasy feeling building up, Yin Yu looked around at the other plates. “Is anything else here that...isn’t water ghou, Sir?”

Pausing in his annihilation of his bowl’s contents, Black Water pushed another plate towards him. Seeing a vaguely normal-looking fish, Yin Yu sighed in relief and took it.

They ate in silence for the ten seconds it took for Black Water to finish his entire bowl. Then, he put it down, and looked straight at Yin Yu.

“I have a proposal.”

Yin Yu almost spat out his mouthful of fish. “Mmmf—?” He swallowed. “Yes, Sir?”

“Crimson Rain said you can quit at any time.”

“That’s correct, Sir.”

“Leave his service,” Black Water said stiffly. “Come work for me.”

If it weren’t for Yin Yu’s servile disposition, he would’ve burst into raucous laughter and toppled over to the floor. Tempting him away from the luscious elegance of Paradise Manor, his comfortable bed, his reasonable hours, his cold but still occasionally conversational boss—in exchange for THIS?! He must be joking.

Some part of this sentiment must have flickered across his expression, because Black Water went on.

“I can offer you what you want most.”

Almost feeling a little indulgent towards Black Water, like he was talking to a little kid, Yin Yu hid a smile. “May I ask what that would be, Sir?”

“Your revenge.”

The inner smile slowly slipped away. Yin Yu paused, feeling his chest grow cold.

“...revenge on...who, My Lord?”

“Don’t play dumb.”

The mood had shifted dark. Yin Yu picked at his plate with his chopsticks. He wouldn’t...he didn’t really want that, no matter how much he’d raged in his head, no matter how much he’d cursed ever meeting *him*.

Right?

“Lord Black Water,” he said quietly. “...I don’t think I want that.”

“You do.”

Yin Yu swallowed. “It’s true, sometimes I do...but, he...” Daring to look up, he met that chilling stare. “He doesn’t understand, he...he’s innocent. It’s wasn’t his fault.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Black Water said. “He took what was rightfully yours.”

“Nothing is *rightfully* mine, I either get it or I don’t,” Yin Yu said, a little annoyed. “And he didn’t *take* it, he...he just happened to ascend, and it’s hard to share a region, and...he didn’t understand that he was taking my place. And, and he’s so popular with his followers—maybe he’s doing a better job than I ever could.” He lowered his head. “...just by being carefree, by running around and beating up whoever he wants.” The resentment burned in his heart, but he just sighed. “...I don’t want to think about him, Sir. I just want to let it be.”

“He took what was yours,” Black Water said gravely. “It doesn’t matter that he doesn’t understand, it’s still his fault. He’s only carefree because he stepped over your bones.”

Yin Yu sighed again, heavily. “But I’m fine now. I have a good job, I eat good food...what else do I want that I don’t have?”

“A seat in the heavens.”

“Revenge on him won’t get that back.”

“But you’ll have justice.”

Yin Yu’s heart burned. He turned away. “...he likes me,” he whispered. “He...trusted me.”

“So what.”

At that, Yin Yu looked up, torn between yearning and disgust. “What do you mean, so what?”

“So what,” Black Water repeated, seeming irritated. “It doesn’t matter if he likes you. In this world, actions must be paid back. When you let him flaunt his disgusting joy over your misery, even his enjoyment of you turns into an insult.”

Yin Yu quietly took a sip from his cold tea as he gathered his thoughts.

Then, however, he looked up at Black Water with something like pity.

“...that’s a nice necklace, Sir,” he said quietly. “Is that a pearl?”

Black Water froze, his expression growing cold. Indeed, from his neck, there swung a delicate pendant; the body was a deformed pearl, cradled in a silver framework shaped like a fish.

“A pearl shaped like that only grows in freshwater,” Yin Yu went on quietly. “I learned that from talking to the importers in ghost city. A pearl from an ocean would be perfectly round.”

The air was ice between them.

“But the South Sea and Black Water Lake are saltwater,” Yin Yu finished, his heart thudding in his ears. “Was your necklace a gift?” He swallowed. “...from somebody who plays carelessly in rivers...”

Black Water broke his chopstick in his hand, and it was Yin Yu’s turn to freeze.

He quickly recovered, though, setting down his cup of tea. “Um...in any case, Sir, it’s actually irrelevant anyway. I’m not very useful. Hua Chengzhu very generously took me in, and he treats me well, but I think the only reason he keeps me around is because of this.” He raised the wrist with the cursed shackle. “So that when His Highness the Crown Prince is found, he can take it off.”

For a few moments, Black Water stared at him with something like disdain. Then, he scoffed. “Foolish.”

Yin Yu blinked. “...Sir?”

“If that’s what he wanted, he would throw you in a cell and chain you down.”

Rubbing his wrist, Yin Yu looked down and away. “Even so, then...maybe it’s because he finds it funny, to have a former heavenly official as his errand boy.”

“Then he would send you out to be humiliated and torn apart.”

“Isn’t it funnier like this?” Yin Yu said gloomily. “Why else would he keep me around?”

At that, Black Water finally stood and turned to leave. Before he did, though, he took the final word.

“Figure it out for yourself,” he said. “And consider my offer.”



Yin Yu finally managed to sort out his thoughts in the quiet, as he led Black Water—who swept after him, billowing in black robes, vengeful—through the silky night of the Western forests that were once Yin Yu’s own territory.

Hua Cheng had warmth to him, Yin Yu decided. He was distant, but he was still in there, somewhere behind that cool and composed look. He was funny, when he wanted to be. He had whims. Though his heart didn’t beat, he *did* have something that he loved; and the love trickled out, and drew people towards him to drink from it.

Black Water was entirely cold.

“Lord Black Water,” he’d asked, when they’d been about to head out. “If this one might be so bold as to ask something.”

“What.”

“What does it feel like? To do things for revenge?”

Black Water had turned to him and replied:

“It doesn’t matter how it feels,” he said darkly. “It’s inevitable. It’s justice, and justice is blind. Anger, catharsis, and hatred are there, but the only thing that truly matters is justice.” His eyes grew steely. “If you lose sight of that, other emotions can lead you astray.”

The thought of Black Water having anything resembling an emotion made Yin Yu amused, and then depressed.



Yin Yu could pinpoint the exact moment where things went wrong.

He was creeping around the enormous palace, flitting from pillar to pillar, following far behind as a masked Black Water cut his way through the tyrant’s guards. Screams and sounds of bloodshed reached his ears, ripping, the smell of blood.

It had been a long, long time since he’d been exposed to a scene like this. The nearest had been the early days of ghost city, when whole sects of cultivators came to attack; he couldn’t help but tremble at that time, as he watched Hua Cheng tear into them like paper. He was trembling now, too; but he managed to hold steady.

Then, as Yin Yu peered around a column, it happened.

In a burst of colorful robes, a woman stumbled out of the closed door that Black Water was advancing towards, and clung to his robes.

“Please!” she begged. “Please, please don’t kill my father. Whatever you want, you can have it, anything, we swear! Money? Soldiers? Whatever you—”

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Yin Yu stared in shock.

A drop of blood rolled off Black Water’s sword, splashing to the ground next to a delicate, twitching hand.

With trembling knees, Yin Yu started to walk, and then ran.

“My Lord!”

Black Water turned back towards him slightly, just as Yin Yu took hold of his arm. “What are you doing.”

“You—why did you—?!”

“He’s using his family as human shields. It was inevitable. The deaths are on him, not me.”

Yin Yu’s vision blurred. “But you can’t! You can’t just—”

“Get out of my way.”

“I won’t!” Yin Yu shouted. “I WON’T! You can’t—I didn’t know it would be like this—I won’t help you! STOP!”

But before Black Water could reply, his eyes suddenly snapped to something else, behind Yin Yu; and Yin Yu turned too late to—

Something struck the back of his head, and his vision went dark.

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CRASH!

Yin Yu bolted upright, his hand to his chest, breathing harshly.

For a few seconds, he could only sit still and slow his breathing. Then, he looked up.

He was in his bedroom at Paradise Manor, surrounded by the familiar furnishings—sumptuous and red, pattered here and there with a silverly stitched butterfly. Slowly, he sank back into the ornate pillows and looked up.

On the ceiling above him, there hung a paper lantern. A stand owner had given it to him as a gift a few weeks back, as thanks for helping him get a grant from ghost city to expand his business; the gifted lantern was white, and it had his mask crudely painted on it. Yin Yu had thought it was endearing, so he'd brought it home and hung it up. Now, it bobbed and spun slow above his head, seeming as though something had recently disturbed it. The movement made the sad-smiling mask on it swing around in a silly way, like it was shaking its head in dismay...oh, that's right, where was his mask?

When Yin Yu turned his head on his pillow, shifting his hair against the fabric, he found it on his bedside table where he usually left it, next to his tiny mudman sculpture. The mudman sculpture was just like one from the human world—except instead of a fisherman pulling up a fish, this one portrayed a ghostly fish pulling up a person.

Yin Yu stretched out an arm and sleepily flicked the tiny person at the end of the fishing rope. It wobbled a little.

Was it all a dream, Yin Yu wondered? What had woken him? His head hurt...

But then, just as he'd just pulled his arm back in and burrowed it back beneath the covers, just as he'd started to drift back off to sleep—

A deafening *CRASH* came again, and Yin Yu's eyes snapped open.

"Idiot," Hua Cheng's voice came from outside the room, slightly muffled by the wall. "No, no, don't get up. You stay there until I tell you to."

Yin Yu blinked in surprise. Who was he talking to?

The other person must have made a move to speak, because Hua Cheng interrupted:

"Shut up," he said. "I didn't say you could talk, either."

“Then what do you want?” came Black Water’s dark and irritated voice—

CRASH!

The paper lantern above Yin Yu’s head shivered, with the force of whatever had just happened outside. Yin Yu could only turn his head in shock, towards the direction of the voices.

“What did I tell you,” Hua Cheng said patiently. “And *how many times* did I say it.”

The only response was a grunt. It was unclear what Black Water’s state was.

“Since you clearly forgot, I’ll repeat the rules that I gave you,” Hua Cheng said calmly. “Just so we’re both on the same page.”

“Get your—”

“One,” he said. “You don’t let him starve.”

“—foot off my—”

“Two,” Hua Cheng interrupted. “You don’t beat him up.”

“—head—I didn’t—”

“Shut up. Three,” he went on. “You don’t involve him in killing innocent people.”

“I didn’t know there would be—”

THUD!

“What do I care, whether you knew beforehand or not? If he quits, it’s your fault either way.”

“What did you want me to do?” Black Water demanded, out of breath. “Leave halfway through without killing my target? I’d never find his hiding place again.”

“Personally, I don’t care what trash you kill. But you should’ve left my servant outside.”

“Then what use is it to *bring* him.”

“I don’t know. You asked for him, I set down the conditions. I was very clear.”

“I brought him back!” Black Water thundered.

“Yes, you did,” Hua Cheng said, the fake smile audible in his voice. “After finishing the job. How thoughtful of you to be so kind as to scrape my servant off the floor on your way out.”

“I—”

“Choose your words wisely. Right now, you’re just making me angrier.”

Black Water’s voice seethed. “If I had your power, I would—”

“But you don’t.”

After a few moments of ragged breathing, Black Water spoke venomously: “But you’re soft,” he seethed. “What are you building here, exactly? A shelter for stray, banished gods—”

SLAP, SLAP, THUD—BAM!

Yin Yu stared, still listless with shock, at the wall; someone had definitely just been slammed against the other side of it.

“Say it again,” Hua Cheng said, low and dangerous. “Imply that His Royal Highness, the Crown Prince of Xianle, is a ‘stray, banished god.’ Go on. Say it.”

Somebody was choking.

“Ggkh—gkhh—”

“Idiot,” Hua Cheng said. Then, there was the sound of someone sliding down, then furious gasping.

Yin Yu wasn’t sure what was reality and what was a dream anymore; a little dazed, he stared at the door, then slowly sank back down against his pillows. “...”

Then—

“Get out of my sight,” Hua Cheng said, “Don’t show your face here for the next month. I’m not lending my servant again. And you’d better hope he doesn’t quit, because if he does, I’m tripling your debt.”

That was the last voice he heard outside. After that, only steps and silence.

It took a few minutes for Yin Yu to sink back into a confused slumber.



Eventually, Yin Yu woke again to the sound of someone’s steps approaching the door. He sat up, turning his face towards it, and steeled himself for the person who he knew would come.

Then the door opened, at Hua Cheng stepped in.

Ghost king and servant looked at each other, one standing impassively with his hands behind his back, the other blinking up wearily from the bed.

“I’ve been informed of what happened,” Hua Cheng said evenly. “Stay or quit, it’s your decision.”

Yin Yu rubbed his forehead a little, still feeling dazed. Then, he reached for the bedside table and picked up the mask.

He held it in his lap and looked at it for a long while, before speaking:

“...I’m not him,” Yin Yu said quietly. “I’m not...His Highness the Crown Prince, I never will be. And if the legends are true, then, I...I don’t think I’m similar to him, either.”

Yin Yu wasn't sure what kind of answer he expected after saying that. He knew that mentioning Xie Lian in any way around Hua Cheng was like prodding at the tiger's den, tempting death. Hua Cheng's regard for His Highness was absolute. It wasn't like he'd just said anything negative, but he wondered what it would take for him to be flung around like Black Water.

Yet, Hua Cheng only raised a brow and answered:

"I still have one eye," he said dryly. "I'm not blind. I know."

The way he said it so straightforwardly, like he'd settled on that conclusion a long, long time ago, surprised Yin Yu. It eased something in his heart a little.

So he picked up the mask, put it on, and nodded once.

Hua Cheng withdrew.



Hua Cheng's workroom was dark, lit only by candles. Yin Yu was sitting across from Hua Cheng, his arm stretched out across the table.

There was a thin strip of paper attached to his wrist, glowing faintly, and the faint sound of brushwork; Hua Cheng was carefully painting thin characters down the surface. Of course, though, no matter how careful he was, the characters were practically unintelligible.

Yin Yu was slumped down this time, just watching him lazily. It was the evening of the day after the incident, but he was still exhausted—probably due to the lousy rest on the stone bed Black Water had given him, and the strike to his head, and the feeling of uncertainty that had drifted around him like a cloud ever since the events of that day.

Giving a weary sniff, Yin Yu sank his head into his free arm and decided to risk asking a question:

"Chengzhu," he said hoarsely.

"Hm."

"...what does it feel like, to do something for love?"

For a moment, Hua Cheng's brush paused. Then, just like nothing had happened, he went on writing before answering.

"It's sometimes painful," said the ghost king as he worked, with the candles throwing odd shadows over his face. "Sometimes good. Sometimes hopeful, sometimes hopeless. It doesn't feel just one way." He paused to dip his brush in the ink again. "What matters is that it's chosen, every day."

"...every day," Yin Yu mumbled, falling asleep into his own arm. "That seems difficult..."

"It can be," Yin Yu heard Hua Cheng reply distantly. "But if you choose it, it nurtures you in return."

Yin Yu blinked lazily, listening.

“It opens your heart to things you didn’t think you would care about.”

Slowly, Yin Yu drifted off to sleep. As he did, though, he caught the last words:

“And then one day, you see something familiar happening, and you realize you can’t just watch anymore.”

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“Really?!” the little street urchin shouted, gazing up at Yin Yu with glowing eyes. “I can join your sect? I can learn how to fight?”

Yin Yu looked down at him and grinned. “You’ll have to work hard, it won’t be easy—”

“I will, I will, I promise!”

Jian Yu scoffed from beside him. “You’re joking. You wouldn’t actually let him in, would you? This brat, there’s clearly something wrong with him.”

But Yin Yu leaned down, taking the little hand. “Come on, come on. I’m responsible for this; if anything happens with him, I’ll deal with it.” He smiled down at the child. “From now on, I’m your shixiong, and you’re my shidi. I’ll always protect you, no matter what.”

“Shixiong!” Quan Yizhen said joyfully, and pulled Yin Yu’s hand so hard that he nearly toppled. “Shixiong, shixiong!”

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Yin Yu drifted awake to the feeling of someone nudging his arm.

“Yin Yu,” said Hua Cheng.

“Hmm...?”

“You fell asleep.”

“Oh...”

“That was the last possible method for removing cursed shackles.” Hua Cheng picked up Yin Yu’s wrist and placed it back in front of him, returning it to him. “There isn’t another way, unless I use up all my spiritual energy. We don’t have to keep trying anymore.”

Groggily, Yin Yu blinked his eyes half-open and mumbled, “No.”

“No?”

“No,” Yin Yu said groggily, barely aware of his words. “You...have to keep trying.”

A pause. “You’re upset because I couldn’t remove yours.”

“Mmn...no, I’m...” Yin Yu rubbed one eye. “I want to be useful. If you don’t need to keep trying anymore, then...why am I around? I want to be useful...otherwise...”

Then.

A hand pressed down on the top of Yin Yu’s head, ruffled his hair gently, and then swept away.

“You think too much,” said Hua Cheng, and left.

“...”

“...”

Yin Yu dozed there for a few seconds longer.

Then, his eyes snapped open, and he bolted upright—

WHAT WAS THAT?



Maybe he’d imagined it, Yin Yu thought, dazed, as he wandered the corridors of Paradise Manor back to his room. Or maybe it *had* been Hua Cheng, but he’d just been removing an extra talisman off his head. Or maybe he’d accidentally brushed his arm by him while leaving. Or maybe—

Little did he know, the sight waiting for him in his room would be even more unexpected. When he walked in, on the bedside table, next to the little mudman figure of the fish who fished for humans, there was—

A bowl of sweet rice balls, pink and white and green, softly soaking in cream with just a dash of honey on top.

Yin Yu walked towards it like a man possessed, and realized there was a small note tucked underneath. He already knew who it was from, but he picked it up anyway, skimming the delicate and scholarly hand.

He’d said “figure it out yourself” before, but now he’d answered instead:

There are two possible reasons.

One. Crimson Rain collects things that both he and His Royal Highness would enjoy.

Two. Crimson Rain does see a shadow of His Royal Highness in you, but he also sees himself.

Yin Yu sat down at the edge of his bed for a long while, looking at the note.

Then, not understanding a thing about what he was feeling, barely even understanding his own name, he picked up the plate of sweet rice balls and started eating. However, as he did so, a few thick and salty tears rolled down his cheeks and into the cream.

He'd remember it, when the three of them met again—but this time, in a much more desperate circumstance.

Chapter End Notes

POOR YIN YU I LOVE HIM

NEXT CHAPTER COMING....SOMETIME, HOPEFULLY SOON!!!

THANK YOU for all the support, i LOVE you all, yin yu enjoyers UNITE!!!!!!!!!!

TWITTER CHAPTER UPDATE PROMO: [HERE](#)

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

NOTE: rating has changed to E

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

To no one's surprise more than that of Yin Yu, he started visiting Black Water, when time permitted.

It had started, at least outwardly, as a request from Yin Yu in order to protect his sanity; instead of being approached without warning by a clone, he preferred a set time and place to exchange information. To this end, Black Water would meet him, in the guise of a waiter, at the inn where Yin Yu often went; and they would go into a shadowy, windowless back room, where Black Water could shift his clone into his preferred form. They would sit there and go over the latest information that was useful to Hua Cheng.

Over time, however, Yin Yu slowly managed to push the talk into conversational territory (if any set of words exchanged with Black Water could be considered as such), and found that there was something to be gained there.

After all, Black Water had once been a scholar.

No matter what Yin Yu asked, about history, about the classics, about philosophy, about art, Black Water was a veritable fountain of knowledge; he had memorized entire volumes of work, and his command of his studies left even Hua Cheng's vast cache of knowledge—cobbed together over ages and ages of work, from from legions of grateful scholar ghosts—solidly in the dust. When prompted, Black Water's taciturn disposition would give way to an almost compulsive outflow of explanations—the tone dry, but the explanation rich with meaning.

It actually made Yin Yu quite sad. Scholar He would've made an excellent heavenly official, civil or martial—maybe even both at once. Even without a natural proficiency towards matters of the earth, he still managed to fill the role of Earth Master without arousing suspicion. To think of such a mind turned into a simple vessel of revenge...

Well, he reasoned, maybe it was precisely *because* of that that Black Water was so resentful, so much more full of bitterness than Yin Yu. Yin Yu knew he was once *good*, but he wasn't confident, especially not anymore. For Black Water to know that he could've reached the pinnacle of the heavens, and to instead have been cast down into hell—such a thing must hurt terribly; but to know that you were once a mediocre martial god, overshadowed by your shixiong, and then become a mediocre servant, as was Yin Yu's case—wasn't it all just par for the course?

Really, upon closer thought, Black Water *had* reached the heavens, and didn't seem to be enjoying it at all—but for someone who seemed to hate his position so much, he certainly wasn't rushing to the revenge that would end it all.

Yin Yu knew why—or rather, he knew who.

He kept most of these thoughts to himself.

Yin Yu wasn't the only one who noticed Black Water's talents, however; Hua Cheng noticed too, and as always, became determined to exploit this to his advantage; so about once a month, the three of them met in paradise manor for a round of learning.

At first, the meetings were *horrible*.

Please don't be in a playful mood, Yin Yu would silently will Hua Cheng, as they sat down at the table with Black Water. Hua Cheng was so much easier to deal with when he was serious or angry. A capricious ghost king was another matter. *Please don't be in a playful mood, please don't be—*

Then, Hua Cheng would kick his boots onto the table, making the chains on them jingle, and grin widely. "Lord Black Water Laoshi, please indulge your students."

And Yin Yu would sigh morosely.

Here we go.

"Shut up," Black Water gritted out.

"Last time was boring. Please pick an interesting classic, I want to learn something fun to show His Highness when he comes back."

"Learning must be for the sake of gaining wisdom," Black Water said venomously. "He who learns things in order to impress others is a fool."

"Is that so? You certainly seem concerned with impressing others."

Black Water's eyes narrowed. "...how so."

Hua Cheng squinted at Black Water's chest. "In your female form, I'm fairly sure you—"

"You *impudent—*"

As the squabbling continued, Yin Yu would usually scan the room for hiding spots, in case fighting broke out. He'd long ago given up trying to mediate.

The learning sessions improved over time, once a fragile trust was built up, and a certain comfortable laziness came to define their meetings. Much to Yin Yu's infinite weariness, though, Hua Cheng always seemed to find a wellspring of amusement in annoying Black Water—

Except for one type of situation.

In those days, there was only one time that Hua Cheng would instantly lose the attitude: whenever Black Water brought up a piece of information that concerned Xianle, or Xie Lian himself. At that, Hua Cheng would actually transform into the perfect, diligent, humble and quiet student—and he wasn't faking it, Yin Yu could tell.

At the end of such learning sessions, Hua Cheng would be quieter than usual; and he sometimes would say something like: "The glory of Xianle's architecture, it really suited him," or "This poem, it really captures his generosity."

Black Water knew better than to say anything in return.

Yin Yu could've been mistaken, but he sometimes felt like Black Water actually respected Hua Cheng for his mission. Two people who were so passionately, feverishly committed to something—wouldn't they naturally understand each other well?

It was almost a little funny to Yin Yu. Crimson Rain Sought Flower and Black Water Sinking Ships, the two most powerful ghosts in existence, powerful *precisely* because of the strength of their obsessions, arguing over a passage of the classics—while plain, tired Yin Yu slumped wearily on a day-bed nearby, his only wish to go to sleep.

Yin Yu wasn't like them at all. Maybe he'd once been passionate about martial arts, but now he was just tired. He didn't have an obsession.

He *didn't* have an obsession.

There were things he thought about a lot, pondered, broke to pieces in his head, but he wasn't obsessed.

Right?

.
. .

Yin Yu pondered all of this as he sat at a table at the inn, leaning his cheek on his hand. In the other hand, he held a note.

Meeting for today is canceled, it said, in ancient Wuyong—they had all learned the language to use as code. Trouble in the sea. Qi Rong moving again. Motives unclear. Next meeting same time next week.

Setting the note down, Yin Yu sighed in disappointment. He'd actually been looking forward to this particular one-on-one meeting with Black Water; he been listening to one particular story-teller recently at another inn, who spun tales of a certain ancient emperor and his harem, and he was curious to know if some things were historically accurate.

Well—Yin Yu *definitely* knew some parts couldn't be accurate, but *those* parts of the story weren't anything he'd talk to Black Water about. Just the thought of it made him—

The mental image of talking to Black Water about *that* made him cough out a laugh, and then he felt ashamed. The right-hand man of Lord Chengzhu listening to such stories, it was unbecoming, but who would know? When he didn't wear his mask, he basically disappeared into the crowd.

...

In fact, wasn't there another installment coming out today? Maybe he should...

Then, all of a sudden—

A flash of curly hair.

Instantly, Yin Yu was on high alert. His heart was pounding; his face was pale. He dug his hands into the table. He didn't have his mask. *He didn't have his mask—*

The man with curly hair turned around, and it wasn't *him*. The jaw was too square, the look in his eyes too pointed. Quan Yizhen didn't have that sort of pointy, scheming look; it was either airy distraction or openly fiery concentration, so overwhelming that you could drown in it, so clearly *driven* that it was clear nothing would stop him—he wouldn't stop to understand—you really had no choice but to drown in him.

No, this definitely wasn't him. Yin Yu sighed in relief.

Then, still riding on the jolt of the adrenaline, the wave of anxiety was replaced by...something else.

Something else—there was a sluggish throbbing of his heart, which spread warmly to his fingers, to his toes.

Curly hair...

Yin Yu stopped a waiter and ordered liquor; the waiter brought a jug and a cup, giving him a sorry look. Yin Yu didn't care; he poured it, then drank it in one gulp. Then, he poured another.

He watched the curly-haired man.

Yin Yu didn't have an obsession. He just had, every once in a while...

Suddenly, the curly-haired man locked eyes with him, and the two stared at each other. Yin Yu didn't look away; he wasn't new to this.

A moment of mutual understanding passed between them.

Then the man came over with a smile, raising his own cup. "Hey," he said, in a low voice. "What's a man like you doing, drinking alone?"

Awful pickup line, nothing that *he* would use, but Yin Yu wasn't really looking for conversation. He simply poured from his jug into the other's cup and simply said—

"Cheers."

"Cheers," the man replied, amusement in his eyes as he threw it back. Yin Yu did the same.

They both set the cups down; the man wiped his mouth with his sleeve, then leaned across the table. "And, if I may ask—who do I have the pleasure of meeting?"

"Yin Yue," said Yin Yu. Not that anyone would link his name to anything anymore, but the lazy alias at least gave him the illusion of security.

"Well, my name is Wei Xian," the man said with a wink, though Yin Yu hadn't asked. "Know why?"

Yin Yu ran a few characters through his head; but before he could answer, the man interrupted again, tracing two figures onto the table.

"It's 'cause I'm *dangerous*," he said smugly.

Feeling a tide of cringe come over him, Yin Yu winced. But he wasn't exactly looking for conversation, so before the man could embarrass himself further, Yin Yu stood up.

"I have a room here. Let's go."



It was bad sex.

“Ungh, baobei,” the man grunted, jackhammering away. “Can you feel my big cock filling you up? Deep in your ass?”

Yin Yu cringed a little, bracing himself against the bed as it rocked. “...sure.”

“Oh, *fuck* yeah. Say it. Say you can feel my big cock deep in your ass.”

“Yeah,” Yin Yu said wearily. “It’s definitely there.”

“Fuck yeah it is. You’re so hot.”

“Okay.”

After a while, when it became clear to Yin Yu that imagining other things wouldn’t make this any better, he sighed. It was true, he assumed, that Quan Yizhen *would* be bad at sex; but Yin Yu was fine with that. In a way, it was part of the appeal. Usually he could play pretend in his head, when he did this with a stranger, whether the sex was good or not—but this particular man seemed insistent on interjecting with his awful, cringeworthy lines every few seconds, shattering the illusion.

So Yin Yu just sighed.

The man, however, took the sigh of defeat differently. “You’re so cute when you moan,” he growled. “Are you close?”

“Um...” Yin Yu was still mostly soft, even despite reaching down to do some work on himself at some point, but it wasn’t like this man was paying attention. “Sure. Yes, I’m close, I’m really close.”

“Yeah, I bet you are, you little slut.”

Slut? Yin Yu wondered morosely. Would Quan Yizhen even know what that meant? He could imagine him asking, buried deep inside as he thrust carelessly in—

“Shixiong!” he would surely yell, an inch from Yin Yu’s face, as he casually rearranged his insides. “Shixiong, what’s a slut?”

And Yin Yu, clinging to his sanity only barely, would choke out: “Where did—you hear—”

“Someone said it about Pei Ming, what is it?”

Yin Yu would bite the inside of his cheek to suppress a strangled gasp. “It’s just—hahh—it’s someone who—has—a lot of—”

“What?”

Past the point of words.

Maybe Quan Yizhen would even stop thrusting altogether, letting his fat cock sit hot and unmoving inside Yin Yu. “Shixiong, I stopped, so can you say it again? What’s wrong? Why are you yelling? Shixiong! Shi—”

Snapping back to reality, Yin Yu realized he was rock hard. “Hahh!” he gasped out, writhing on the man’s cock. “Th—please—!”

Weakly, he came.



Yin Yu laid beside the snoring stranger, staring up morosely at the ceiling. A voice was echoing in his head.

“Shixiong! Shixiong, it feels really good! Shixiong...”

“You’re so sick,” Yin Yu mumbled to himself, pressing a pillow over his own head, and rolled over.

Peace—he just wanted a little peace. That was it, wasn’t it? From this bizarre life that he’d grown so used to, from the obsession that filled up his head—peace...



The peace wouldn’t last long.

Yin Yu was just rousing from sleep, remembering the weight and warmth of another person beside him, when all of a sudden—

BANG! Hua Cheng kicked the door open.

“Yin Yu,” Hua Cheng said flatly. “There you are. I need you to—oh, you had sex. Congratulations. Anyway, I need you to—”

Yin Yu jolted upright, drawing the covers up to his naked chest. “Sir?” he gasped. “How did you find me?!”

“Xuanxuan told me. The point is—”

A dark voice interrupted from behind him. “Don’t call me that.”

“Okay, the idiot told me. The point is, I need you to—”

Now that he’d fully woken up, Yin Yu was getting a little mad. “Could you not have given me a warning through the array, my Lord? Thirty minutes?!”

By now, though, the man beside him had woken up. “Whoa,” he said nervously, sitting up with his hand held out in defense. “Is this your...”

“No!” Yin Yu said in horror. “Not at *all*!”

“But I am,” said Hua Cheng. “What a son you are. You shouldn’t speak like this to your father.” He jabbed a finger over his shoulder. “Also, you’re upsetting your grandmother.”

A dark voice interrupted from behind him. “Don’t call me that.”

“Okay, you’re upsetting the idiot.”

Yin Yu was getting a headache. “I’m not—neither of you are my—!”

“That’s not very filial of you.” Having had his fun, though, Hua Cheng seemed to lose interest and slid the man a bored look. “I’m tired of this thing. Yin Yu. How was the sex, from one to ten.”

Yin Yu spluttered. “My Lord?!”

“Be honest.”

Yin Yu glanced at the shocked man next to him. “...” He looked down. “...two.”

The man’s eyes widened. “What?! But you—aaiiEEEEEEEEEEEE—”

Hua Cheng had lazily flicked a finger, making a window fly open, and with a wave of his hand sent the man hurtling through it and into the bushes outside.

“If you want sex just get an expensive prostitute, I’ll give you the money for it, don’t waste your time on this,” said Hua Cheng. “Now, put on your clothes and come with us.”



The ride on the boat to Black Water’s lair was awkward.

Black Water sat darkly in one corner. Crimson Rain slouched carelessly in another. Yin Yu gazed out from the front, staring out into the open sea.

“...”

“...”

“...”

“Two out of ten,” Hua Cheng mused. “Really.”

“...Chengzhu,” Yin Yu begged.

“I’m only curious.”

“Shut up,” Black Water muttered. “I don’t want to hear about this.”

Hua Cheng shrugged. “En, well, he was in your inn.”

“I don’t want to hear about this.”

“Yin Yu, top or bottom?”

“You *impudent*—why are you even asking him?!”

“I’d like to learn as much as I can about this subject,” said Hua Cheng. “I didn’t know Yin Yu did this type of thing, so naturally I have to ask. It’s important that I become very skilled, and books and prostitutes can only teach so much, so it’s useful to hear about people’s real experiences.”

“Disgusting.”

“Ah. I see.”

“What.”

“He Xuan, are you a virgin?”

Yin Yu made a calculation: if they fought on the ship, it would sink, and Yin Yu very much preferred not to drown. Therefore, he interrupted to ask quietly:

“If my Lords wouldn’t mind, could one of you explain what I can help you with today...?”

Hua Cheng nodded, and—to Yin Yu’s great relief—became serious. “Qi Rong’s minions are becoming bolder. They’re mounting attacks on Black Water’s lair and ghost city, simultaneously. It’s obvious that there must be someone helping them. We don’t know who it is, but they must be powerful.”

Yin Yu thought for a second. “If my Lords wouldn’t mind my asking, why would someone help Qi Rong? From the lowest of ghosts to the highest of heavenly officials, no one stands to benefit, since he’s...” Yin Yu coughed. “...the way he is.”

“Unclear,” said Black Water grimly. “But most likely, someone wants us two out of the way, maybe in preparation for something. It must be someone powerful enough against ghosts that they don’t care which one rises to the top.”

“En,” Hua Cheng agreed. “And today they’ve suddenly been gathering forces on the edge of Black Water’s lair. You’re the only one here who isn’t a ghost, and that works to our advantage. If we run into any obstacle that can’t be surpassed by ghosts, you’ll be of great use.”

Wouldn’t it be the other way around? Yin Yu thought glumly. Wouldn’t most obstacles be surpassable by ghosts, but not mortals?

Little did he know how swiftly he would be proved wrong.

It only took a few minutes for everything to turn on its head.

The first sign of trouble was Black Water’s furrowed brow, as he stood stiffly. “Something’s wrong.”

The second sign of trouble was the bone fish on either side of the ship, who supported it on top of the water, stopping abruptly in the water, then starting to drift to the side.

“...” Hua Cheng watched them. “I’m going to guess you aren’t telling them to do that.”

Black Water seemed to be concentrating on something intently.

Then, a piece of driftwood drifted by too, following the bone fish as they drifted sideways. Then, a few more pieces of wood. Then, some leaves.

Starting to feel positively queasy, Yin Yu followed the debree with his gaze as it got farther and farther away—then, strangely, took the trajectory of a curve. As though they were being pulled along into—

A massive circle.

“My Lords?!” Yin Yu stammered. “I think—”

“En. I see it.” Hua Cheng stood, reaching for his umbrella. “Then, let’s—”

But before he could speak came the third sign of trouble—or rather, the trouble itself. With a deafening roar the waters churned, and a massive whirlpool flew open around them, followed by an awful gust of wind. All of a sudden, they were all bugs circling a drain.

Yin Yu threw himself at the side of the ship as it swirled up into the massive wall of water, clinging to the wood with his eyes squeezed shut, and was trying to decide which deity to pray to, when all of a sudden—

A hand snagged the back of his clothing and pulled him loose. He fell back, and...

Yin Yu turned to see Hua Cheng dragging him as he dove straight into the center of the whirlpool.

“CHENGZHU, ARE YOU MAD?” he roared over the deafening waves. “CHENGZHU, I CAN’T BREATHE UNDERWATER! CHENG—AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAIIIIIIII—”



The smell of earth in the air, damp and unpleasant. Then, two familiar voices.

Familiar, though...slightly...what? What was it?

“He Xuan. Try punching his stomach again.”

An annoyed sigh. “Why.”

“Maybe it’ll work.”

“I already told you that it’s useless. There’s no water in him.”

“Then why won’t he wake up, idiot?”

“Because he probably fainted from fright, you fool.”

“Touchy, touchy.”

“Shut *up*. What do we do.”

“Well, I can’t carry him if I’m like this. Obviously you can’t either.”

“No, I meant about Qi Rong.”

“Well, we can’t get out until Yin Yu takes us through the barriers, so I guess we’ll just wait. Ah, look, he’s stirring.”

Yin Yu had groaned, turning his head slightly. A hand slapped at his face a little, saying flatly—“Hey, wake up. Wake up. Wake up—” But there was something different about the hand...and about the voices. It was almost as though...

The other voice cut in sharply. “What do you mean, you guess we’ll *wait*? We can’t wait. They could be breaching my territory right *now*.”

“Should’ve built a more secure lair, then.”

“They’ll find the real earth master.”

“Oh, that would be unfortunate.” A pause. “For you.”

A hiss of frustration. “Are you even—?!”

“...Chengzhu?” Yin Yu mumbled, lifting his lashes slowly. “Lord Black Water...why are your voices so—?”

Suddenly, his eyes opened wide, very wide—because he’d caught sight of something.

Two children’s faces blinked down at him, one with an eyepatch and a little braid down one side, the other wearing a grim look ill-suited for such a small face.

“Yin Yu, wake up quickly,” child-form Hua Cheng said. “We’ve run into a problem.”

Somewhere inside Yin Yu, a primal scream echoed in the walls of his chest. On the outside, though, he just sagged morosely onto the dirt floor and sighed.



“Okay,” Yin Yu said, panting as he ran. “My Lord, just so I’m sure I’ve understood—”

“I already said everything once, why repeat it?” a young Hua Cheng said, from his position clinging onto Yin Yu’s back. “Since this is a good opportunity, I’d like to discuss something else instead.”

“Shut up,” the young version of Black Water said, as he ran alongside them. He seemed to be having some trouble keeping up. “Yin Yu. Slow down.”

Hua Cheng ignored him. “Yin Yu, run faster.”

“You—!” Black Water gritted his teeth. “Why does he get to be carried, if I’m the one who has to get to water?”

“Because I pay him,” said Hua Cheng. “Anyway, returning to—”

“Wait, wait,” Yin Yu interrupted, slowing down. “I’m not sure I understand why we have to get to water—”

“This island isn’t far from my main island,” Black Water replied. “As long as we get to the edge, and I get to my territory’s ocean, I can gain my powers back and swim to the manor.”

A small hand suddenly grabbed Yin Yu’s ponytail and yanked. “Yin Yu.”

“Ow ow ow let go let go let—!”

“Pay attention, up ahead,” Hua Cheng said, releasing his hair. “Another barrier.”

Sweeping his ponytail forward, out of the reach of his Lord’s cruel hands, Yin Yu grabbed Black Water around the waist, lifted him dangling up, and gingerly leapt over a ghost-repelling barrier. Even the weak heavenly energy which he projected was enough to get the three of them past such obstacles, and he did so with a skillful step; but his skillful grace was lost when Hua Cheng spoke drolly again.

“Anyway, as I was saying earlier. Yin Yu, top or bottom.”

Yin Yu almost tripped.

“Don’t fall over, it’s a serious question. What’s the problem.”

“Obviously he doesn’t care for your vulgarities,” Black Water bit out.

“What are you protecting him for, like he’s some virgin? He was having sex in your inn, naturally he should be comfortable with this type of talk.”

You really shouldn’t talk about me like this while I’m carrying you on my back, My Lord, Yin Yu thought darkly. Of course, he didn’t dare say it.

Luckily, Hua Cheng didn’t know how close he was to getting thrown off. “Shut up, Black Water. He’s not answering because of you, stop bothering him. Yin Yu, answer the question.”

“Um, I have to keep, to keep focusing on running,” Yin Yu mumbled.

To his misfortune, Hua Cheng was perceptive. “Oh,” he said. “Could it be you’re actually embarrassed about it?”

“Of course he is,” Black Water hissed. “He knows he’s done something wrong.”

Yin Yu felt clouds gather over his mood. The two ghost kings, either oblivious to or ignoring his disposition, continued to discuss his sex life.

“Done something wrong?” Hua Cheng said. “There’s nothing wrong. Why shame him?”

“Don’t be so innocent.”

“It’s just a physical act. If my servant needs some way to satisfy his base animalistic urges, it’s his business.”

“That’s not why he’s doing it,” said Black Water, darkly. “He’s obviously using it to make up for some other deficiency in his life.”

“En, maybe you’re right.” Hua Cheng’s tone changed to an almost interested one. “You know, he’s a pretty complicated one, actually.”

“I’ve noticed.”

Yin Yu cried out in his soul—*I’M LITERALLY RIGHT HERE????*—and desperately tried to think of a way to end the conversation, but Hua Cheng was insistent.

“So, Yin Yu, top or bottom. I’m not saying it to judge something, I just want to gather opinions on which one is better. If I ever served someone in that way, I’d want to make sure that they get the more pleasurable role.”

At this point, Yin Yu, in his desperation to make the conversation go away, decided to fumble out an answer: “It...it really depends on the person’s preference, Chengzhu—”

“But you must have an opinion on which one you prefer. So, which one is it.”

Regretting his whole life, Yin Yu shut his mouth. Despite this, the conversation continued without him, refusing to die.

“Yin Yu. Which one is it. Which one is it. Yin Yu. Yin Yu. Black Water.”

“What do you want.”

“Which one do you think he prefers.”

“I don’t know and I don’t care.”

“I think bottom.”

“Tch. You clearly pay no attention.”

At that, Yin Yu decided that he’d finally reached his limit. He was tired, he was cold, he was hungry, and the two child-shaped ghost kings that he was painstakingly shepherding through the network of tunnels were discussing whether he topped.

“I’m tired,” he mumbled, and let Hua Cheng off his back. “I have to rest.”

“We can’t rest,” Black Water said sharply. “They could be invading my territory right now. If they—”

Yin Yu sat heavily on the ground, took out a steamed bun, and took a bite. Just as quickly, though, he almost spat it back out; it seemed that when he’d been dragged through the water, it had been soaked in brine. But what else could he do? He choked his way through it, before speaking:

“I was woken up early today,” he said flatly. “I haven’t eaten. I’m cold. I’m going to rest.”

Since Hua Cheng didn’t care one way or another, he shrugged and sat down as well; but Black Water was still insistent, gnashing his teeth.

“If my territory collapses, yours is next. Don’t you understand that?”

“No,” said Hua Cheng, leaning against a stone wall. “I’ll just protect ghost city better.”

And at that, Black Water’s face, childish though it was, blackened like a storm:

“You’re *so* confident in yourself, aren’t you?” he hissed. “You think that sheer faith can get you through anything, alone. It’s the thinking of a child. People more faithful than you have been brought down low, what makes you think you’re immune? But you’ll learn one day.”

“Okay,” said Hua Cheng, messing with a few sticks on the ground. Lazily, he kindled a fire.

Seeing that he was going to be ignored, Black Water sat by the fireside and glowered.

Yin Yu chewed glumly at his steamed bun.

“...”

“...”

“...”

“So, Yin Yu, top or—”

“WHY do you keep asking that?” Black Water said furiously. “What do you care?”

“I already told you.”

“If you’re *so* curious about sex, then just shut up go try it.”

“Of course not,” Hua Cheng said, with pride. “I’m saving myself.”

Black Water scoffed. “For your god?”

“I would do anything asked of me by His Highness.”

A sneer. “So you think he’ll want to.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” he said. “But at least I’m not fucking my worst enemy’s younger sibling.”

Yin Yu made a quick calculation, as he finished the last of his too-salty steamed bun; if they fought in this underground space, they’d blow it up and it would collapse. He had to end this conversation as fast as possible. So, with a sigh—feeling the last of his pride crumble—he spoke, as he folded his outer robe into a pillow:

“I want to fuck my shidi,” he said quietly.

Both Hua Cheng and Black Water fell silent and turned to him.

“I want to—no, I want to be fucked by my shidi,” he went on simply, as he patted the makeshift pillow into acceptable shape. “I want him to fuck me until I scream. I want him to do whatever he wants with my body, not caring whether he gets me off or not. Maybe not even understanding that he’s supposed to. I just want to finally give into him.”

With that, as though he’d just been talking about the weather, Yin Yu settled down onto the makeshift pillow, turned with his back to the fire, and closed his eyes.

For a few moments, there was silence.

Then—

“You see?” Hua Cheng said. “I told you he was complicated.”

“Disgusting,” Black Water said, in a low and disapproving voice.

“You’re just annoyed that you were wrong about him topping.”

Yin Yu pressed his hands over his ears and went to sleep.



When he woke up from his nap, he carried on with his task. He’d hoped his confession would shock the two ghost kings into silence, but it only worked for a while before they began squabbling with each other endlessly again; and so they kept on squabbling, even as Yin Yu blearily dragged them out of the system of tunnels and into the open air.

“Finally,” he gasped, looking around. “Now, we have to get to—”

A blast of spiritual energy from who-knows-where blew up the ground at his feet, and so he picked up the pint-sized Black Water and started running.

Yin Yu ran. He ran and ran and ran, hearing the dirt get blown up behind him, rushing towards the shore, which he could glimpse through the trees in the distance.

There was an odd feeling about this scene, almost nostalgic, as he carried his two child-sized superiors through the mess of it all. He could feel Hua Cheng’s bored acceptance of the entire situation, as he held on nonchalantly to his back, and see Black Water’s expression, too grim for his young body—the whole situation was unnatural, no matter how you looked at it; but carrying children like this, running, it reminded him of—



“PUT ME DOWN!” Quan Yizhen shouted in his ear. “SHIXIONG PUT ME DOWN I WANNA FIGHT IT I WANNA FIGHT I WANNA—”

“It’s okay!” Yin Yu insisted, wincing away from the volume. “Yizhen, just calm down first, okay? This yao was too powerful, it’s for sect leader to deal with.”

“BUT I WANNA FIGHT! I WANNA PUNCH IT—”

Yin Yu laughed helplessly as he leapt on through the trees, carrying the frustrated youth on his back. He turned his head a little to look over his shoulder, into the tightened, pouty face that stared back at him. “We’ll be strong enough to fight things like that eventually, okay? Just keep training hard.”

Quan Yizhen’s eyes widened. “...Shixiong can’t fight it either?”

“Nope,” said Yin Yu, as he leapt on, branch to branch. “Look at me, I used up all my energy just now, too. I can’t even ride my sword. Good thing the sect elders came on time—otherwise, who knows what would’ve happened.”

For a few moments, Quan Yizhen was quiet on his back. Then, his voice came stubbornly: “I would’ve.”

Yin Yu blinked. “Hm?”

“I would’ve protected Shixiong,” Quan Yizhen insisted. “I would’ve smacked that yao to death.”

With a good-natured sigh, Yin Yu shook his head. “The most important part of fighting isn’t punching. It’s knowing when to run away, and knowing how to run away.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Because you can’t fight if you’re dead, silly.”

“But I wouldn’t die, I would beat them.”

“Shh!” Yin Yu admonished, now thoroughly amused. “Don’t speak nonsense like this. Look, I’ll teach you how to run like this—don’t you want to learn how?”



Yin Yu was snapped out of the daydream by the tiny Black Water yanking at his sleeve, almost making him stumble. “There!” he demanded. “The shore! Let’s go!”

Checking behind him quickly—they’d outrun the worse of the blasts, though they hadn’t been able to figure out where they were coming from—Yin Yu skidded to a stop at the beach. “Okay,” he gasped, out of breath. “Now, what do we—”

Without a word, Black Water leapt from his arms and into the water. He didn’t make a single splash; instead, like a water snake, he slipped in and disappeared without a trace.

Yin Yu stared at the water until Hua Cheng scoffed lazily on his back. “No manners at all. He didn’t even say thank you.”

“...” Yin Yu didn’t really know what to say to that, but he pulled his gaze away from the murky ocean and looked over his shoulder. “So, how do we get back? Do you have enough energy for the dice?”

“Not yet,” said Hua Cheng, meeting his gaze with those eerie, dark eyes. “Actually, though, I was downplaying this in front of Black Water to avoid too many questions. There’s something powerful involved here and I’d like to know what it is. Turn back quietly. I want to see what was attacking us just now.”

Risky. Yin Yu hesitated. “Are you sure? With you like this...”

“I won’t get another chance.”

“Chengzhu intends to fight it?”

“Not like this, but I want to know what it is for next time. Go quietly.”

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. .
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But who knew that tree branches here were so brittle, that they’d *snap* quite so easily under even the lightest of steps, immediately giving away their position?

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. .
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“Faster.”

Yin Yu wheezed, throwing himself forward. “I’m trying—I’m trying—!”

“Yin Yu, faster.” Hua Cheng never sounded afraid, but his voice now was a little tense. His grip was tight around Yin Yu’s shoulders. “It’s catching up—”

“What is it?” Yin Yu gasped. “Did you see what it is?”

“No. Don’t waste your breath, go faster—”

Faster! Was that even possible?

“Your dice—your spiritual energy—is it enough yet to—!”

“No. Maybe in five more minutes. For now, don’t waste your breath, just go—”

Faster, faster—

Faster faster faster—!

But suddenly, the branch beneath Yin Yu’s foot exploded into smithereens in a blast of spiritual energy, and he was falling.

“Oof!” Yin Yu thudded heavily to the ground on his front, and heard a crack. There went a rib. He hissed in pain, then trembled as he tried to prop himself up on his arms. His head was spinning. “Ugh...I think I—”

“Get up.” Hua Cheng’s voice was more than tense now; there was something else in his tone. “Quick.”

“How far behind us is it?”

“It’s—”

The sound of a step behind them. Yin Yu looked up, wincing in pain—

And his pupils shrank.

No.

It was...

It couldn't be, but it was...

"It's a skin, it's tricking you," said Hua Cheng, shaking his shoulders. "Get up, get up. That's an order. Yin Yu. Yin *Yu*."

Yin Yu stared blankly.

"Yin Yu. Look at me."

But Yin Yu just stared at the figure as it advanced.

"Yin Yu, it's fake, it has to be someone who knows him well. Stop looking. Stop *looking*."

Nothing.

Then, finally—

"YIN YU!" Hua Cheng barked, losing his cool, *truly* losing his cool, maybe for the first time since the incident with the poisoning. He clenched Yin Yu's shoulders in his hands, the desperation making his young voice fiery. "If I'm dispersed right now, *he's* alone in this world—You can't fail me right now, I can't fail right now, I can't, I *CAN'T*!"

But Yin Yu didn't even move, frozen in place. He only kept his eyes trained on the figure that now walked forward, advancing through the forest towards them coolly. Curly hair tossed in the wind.

And at that, finally—

"DON'T YOU KNOW I HATE BEING LIKE THIS?!" Hua Cheng roared out furiously, shaking him. "I WOULDN'T DEPEND ON ANYONE IF I DIDN'T HAVE TO! NOT ON YOU, NOT ON ANYONE!" His eyes blazed; he was losing hope, and the desperation was driving him mad. "But I thought that if I *had to* depend on someone—if I had to for *his* sake, then at least—no, no, no, it can't end like this—"

He went wild, clutching at Yin Yu's robes.

"YIN YU!"

For a moment, Yin Yu didn't move.

The figure took a step, then another step—

Then, with a movement so sharp and quick that it was nearly imperceptible, Yin Yu reached down, whipped a throwing knife from his belt, and flung it with a soft *whiz* through the air. It landed precisely on target: the tree branch right above the advancing figure, who had neglected the branches overhead in favor of focusing on the scene before its eyes.

The creature, curly-haired, fake-skinned, looked up with Quan Yizhen's wide eyes to the sight of a heavy tree branch crashing down, which fell with tremendous force and crushed it to the ground.

Precisely as planned.

Yin Yu hadn't meant to give Hua Cheng an impression like this, but he'd had to hold still and pretend to be shocked; if he didn't, he wouldn't have been able to get the thing to walk up under the heavy branch. In fact, Yin Yu had known from the beginning that it wasn't the real Quan Yizhen.

The look in his eyes hadn't been right.

And so, praying that his Lord would forgive him, Yin Yu picked up the small, shocked Hua Cheng and barreled forward.

"HOLD ON!" he shouted, throwing the ghost king onto his back—

And he ran forward towards the fake Quan Yizhen, skidded to a stop next to the half-crushed thing, who stared up at him blankly—and with a deep breath, Yin Yu fell to his knees beside it, made a hand seal, and cried out—

"ENERGY THEFT SPELL!"—

—and pressed his lips over its mouth.

He remained like that for five seconds that felt like an eternity, sucking in a current of spiritual energy.

Then he was scrambling to his feet, grabbing a pair of dice from his pocket, and leaping up onto the nearest branch. Without a moment's hesitation, he grabbed the dice and tossed them into the air, springing up deftly after them to disappear into the resulting portal; but just before he did, he felt Hua Cheng grow rigid on his back.

As he entered the portal, Yin Yu looked back to see Hua Cheng staring at the ground, his eyes wide, a *look* on his face unlike anything Yin Yu had ever seen. So Yin Yu followed his gaze down.

Oh.

Still crushed beneath a tree branch on the ground, the fake Quan Yizhen had changed skins. It had put on another one, the skin of a person that Yin Yu didn't recognize. It was hard to recognize the form in any case, in the state that it was in—torn open, torn, gory. The only thing Yin Yu registered was a white robe stained so bloody that it was red, a matted curtain of brown hair, and pair of glassy eyes staring emptily up.

Then they were through the portal, and it was gone.



Tip...*whoosh*...tip...*whoosh*...tip...

Yin Yu's shoes made careful, quiet work of the rooftops, *tipping* off of them lightly before soaring over to the next. The night air was quiet through his hair; a full, glowing moon hung alongside them.

They'd be at ghost city soon; this was as close as Yin Yu was able to get with the meager spiritual energy he'd stolen

In his mind, though, he was somewhere else.

“Shixiong!” Quan Yizhen screamed out in delight, clutching at his shoulders. “Shixiong, it’s like flying!”

“Hold on to my back, stop squirming. Look, here we go again—”

Whoosh!

“Wah!”

“Isn’t it fun?”

“Uh huh!”

Yin Yu soared across the town’s roofs, confident, enjoying the fresh breeze. He could feel Quan Yizhen’s exhilarated trembling on his back, and it made him laugh.

“Yes, really,” he coaxed. “Don’t be scared, you’ll be used to it soon.”

“I’m not scared! I want to do it just like Shixiong.”

At this point in the memory, the trembling at his back had ceased; but in the present moment, Yin Yu couldn’t mistake the continued trembling against his back.

It couldn’t be.

Could it?

He turned his head back a little and shifting his mask awkwardly against his head, trying to blink away the wetness that had gathered in his eyes after reminiscing, to check on Hua Cheng. Hua Cheng been listless after the incident with the clone, entirely quiet, which was extremely odd; his limbs had been so limp that Yin Yu had had to take off his outer robe and strap the small ghost king’s body to himself, back-to-back, so that Hua Cheng was facing behind them. He’d hoped just to keep him from moving around too much until he regained his senses, but Hua Cheng had just remained limp.

Now, though, he was trembling.

Though he continued to skim the rooftops, Yin Yu felt worried; he looked further over his shoulder at the back of Hua Cheng’s head. “Chengzhu?”

Hua Cheng continued to tremble.

“Are you okay?”

Silence. Then, finally—

“I’m so weak,” Hua Cheng said quietly, in a small and choked-up voice.

If Yin Yu didn’t know any better—if he hadn’t noticed that there were some things Hua Cheng never, *never* did in front of others—he would think from his voice that Hua Cheng was crying.

“I’m too weak,” Hua Cheng went on, the voice dropping to a hiss. “No matter what, no matter how many years pass, how much power I have, I’m still weak. I’m too weak for dianxia to depend on me. I don’t deserve it. I’ll never deserve it. I’m useless.”

And at that, the tears in Yin Yu’s eyes, which had lingered even after that old memory had dispersed, spilled over; and he couldn’t help it anymore—

“What do *you* have to cry about?” he wept. “I failed totally—I turned my back on that dummy when he needed me, and then he suffered because of it! I let myself get petty, I let myself believe everything was his fault like a big, stupid idiot, instead of looking at myself. I should’ve—I don’t even know whether he *knows* that I didn’t mean it! And I even miss him even though he ruined everything, or maybe I ruined it, or maybe we both did—I didn’t even know whose fault it is! I’m just stupid, everything is stupid, and I *fucked up*!”

He was blubbing now, fat tears streaking down his cheeks.

“So what do *you* have to cry about? Be quiet! Stop crying! You haven’t even *failed* yet!”

He hadn’t expected an answer; but as he sniffled pathetically and wiped a sleeve across his eyes, still bounding across those moonlit rooftops, Yin Yu heard a whisper of an answer behind him, barely audible:

“Yes I have.”



Yin Yu had foolishly entertained the prospect that once they returned to ghost city, once he let an empty-looking Hua Cheng down from his back—once Hua Cheng absorbed some of the potent yin energy of the land and shifted back to his normal form, once he walked past him silently into paradise manor in stormy silence and disappeared—that everything would go back to normal. After all, Hua Cheng had gotten into bad moods for various reasons before, and he’d usually be back to normal fairly fast. Maybe a day or two.

Even after weeks of missed appointments and messages and ignored quiet knocks on the door had passed, Yin Yu still thought things would be normal eventually; but one day, a ghost approached him quietly and tapped on his shoulder.

“Um...Sir, Waning Moon?” he said nervously. “...sorry to bother, can you, er...help us out with somethin’?”

“Hm?” Yin Yu said, raising his head from the cup of tea he’d been nursing. Beside him on his desk, an unusually large mountain of paperwork threatened to fall over. “What is it?”

“Someone’s here to see Lord Chengzhu,” the ghost said, and coughed. “But he wouldn’t take no for an answer, and now he’s...”

“I’ll go see,” said Yin Yu, standing wearily. This had already happened multiple times this week. “What’s his name?”

“Won’t say, but he seems kinda...”

The ghost thought for a second, sucking a long breath through his teeth before responding.

“...fishy?”

Yin Yu sighed morosely and dragged himself to the door. *Here we go.*

Chapter End Notes

THAT TOOK SO LONG TO WRITE I DONT EVEN KNOW WHY!!!! POOR HUA CHENGY
AND YIN YU

THANK U ALL SO MUCH FOR UR SUPPORT, I HAVE LONG SINCE GIVEN UP ON
RESPONDING TO ALL THE BEAUTIFUL COMMENTS BUT PLS KNOW I TREASURE
THEM

TWO MORE CHAPTERS!!!! I HOPE NEXT ONE COMES WAY FASTER

TWITTER PROMO: [HERE](#)

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Yin Yu carefully swept the dust off the small table, crouching in the corner of his room, balancing on the balls of his feet. Sweep-sweep, sweep-sweep. It was early morning, dead-silent, and the sound of it seemed to fill the room.

He put down the small broom and stared at the table wearily for a few moments, frowning.

Then he took hold of it and shifted it over. Like this, the slightest bit of sunlight from the window lit a spot in the center of the table, making the grain of the wood glisten. Hmm...that was better, he guessed. With that done, he cautiously swept a little more dust away, smoothed a soft white tablecloth over the top, and turned to the box of items by his side.

He hadn't done this in a while. How did it go, again...?

First, he put up a vase. Then, he hoisted up a jug of water and poured, and—ah, he'd spilled some over the edge. Were his hands shaking? No, that would be silly. He dabbed gingerly at the spill, before turning and gathering the bunch of white flowers he'd bought that morning. Plucking the stray leaves off the bottom, he slotted the stems down into the vase.

Okay.

Next were the two small bowls. One, he filled with water. In the other, he placed a lumpy apple. Next came the little incense burner, which he filled halfway with ash.

He paused for a moment, wondering if he'd finally gone insane.

Then, after stealing a furtive glance towards the door—he'd locked it, but you could never be too sure—he pried the cover off a small wooden box, and looked glumly down into it.

"Sorry," Yin Yu mumbled to it. "Um...I haven't done this in a while."

He reached down into the box, his fingers digging past into the clean scraps of cloth he'd used as protection.

"Please don't be broken, or he'll *really* kill me."

With that, he grasped and pulled the object out; and after a sigh of relief, once he saw that it was intact, he placed it in the center of the table, right where the ray of light from the window touched so softly.

Yin Yu drew out three sticks of incense, lighting them carefully with a sliver of his spiritual power allowance, and fanned them out before clasping them in his hands and bowing his head.

"Your Highness. Um, welcome. Sorry."

The serene, smiling face of the crown prince statue gazed silently back.

Yin Yu tucked the incense sticks into the ash, then settled into a proper kneel again and mumbled out a few words.

“...I thought it would be too weird to ask him. I’m sure he won’t notice if one of you is gone, he’s made a lot. So, sorry for taking you without asking.”

Placidly staring at him, as though encouraging him to go on, the statuette said nothing.

“I actually feel kind of stupid about this,” Yin Yu whispered, and then hurriedly corrected—“Er, not that *you’re* stupid, Your Highness—” A glance around the room to check for butterflies, then back to the statue—“It’s just that, well...I don’t know if you can still hear any worshiper’s prayers, with this thing...”

He looked down at the cursed shackle on his wrist, and his voice softened.

“...I definitely can’t hear mine. But, I’m pretty sure I don’t have worshipers left anyway, so it’s not like I would know.”

He looked back up.

“In any case, you’re special, right? Chengzhu esteems you this much, you really must be someone special. So, maybe you *can* hear. So, I have a request.”

Yin Yu smacked his hands together, bowed his head, and squeezed his eyes shut, before blurting—

“Chengzhu isn’t doing well, and I think he really, *really* needs you this time, so, if it isn’t too much trouble—won’t you please come back soon, taizi dianxia?”

His voice wobbled a little, but he still went on:

“Please?”



Yin Yu didn’t mention it to anyone—*especially* not to Black Water, when he came looking for him.

Indeed, when a little servant ghost brought Yin Yu into the hall of paradise manor, which was empty except for one furiously pacing Black Water, it didn’t seem that Black Water was there to talk to him at all.

“Why did you bring *him*?” Black Water spat at the cowering little ghost servant at Yin Yu’s side, throwing him a cold look. “I’m here for Crimson Rain.”

Yin Yu tucked his arms behind his back, standing on the raised platform upon which the jaded divan was set. He gazed down at Black Water through his mask. “Unfortunately, Chengzhu isn’t—”

“Don’t play games with me. I *know* he heard my messages in the array. I even used his *detestable* password—”

“As I said,” Yin Yu repeated delicately, “Chengzhu—”

“You.” Black Water narrowed his eyes at the servant ghost. “Get out.”

“Y-y-yes, milord!” the little ghost squeaked, and promptly fled.

In the instant that he left, Yin Yu sat down on the jaded divan, shoved his mask out of the way, and put his head in his hands. “Lord Black Water,” he said helplessly. “I don’t know what to do.”

“That’s useless to me.”

“You don’t get it, I’ve tried.”

Black Water narrowed his eyes. “Tried what? What’s wrong with him?”

“It’s—ever since we came back from that outing. We were chased by someone, and that person shifted to a form that really shocked him, or...I don’t know. Maybe I did something, too?”

“Speak clearly. Ever since that outing, *what*.”

Yin Yu hesitated. “It’s hard to explain. He’s just...different.”

“Different how?”

Mentally sorting through the worst ordeals of the past two weeks, Yin Yu propped his chin in his hands and sighed.

“Well...”



Knock-knock-knock. “Chengzhu?”

Nothing.

Knock-knock-knock-knock-knock. “Chengzhu!”

Silence.

THUD. THUD. THUD. “CHENG—”

“What,” a voice said finally, from the other side of the door.

Yin Yu straightened, facing the door of Hua Cheng’s bedroom, and tucked his arms behind his back. “Sorry to disturb you, but um, when I asked the servant ghost, they—never mind. Actually, I was just wondering, we haven’t had a briefing in three days. Also, I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“So what,” said the voice.

“...I was just...” Yin Yu waffled a little. “...wondering if you...needed anything?”

“No.”

“...” Yin Yu’s palms were sweating. “...okay. I mean, yes, my Lord.”

He stood outside the door for a few more seconds, unsure of what to do. Finally, he raised his voice again.

“Also, there’s kind of an urgent zoning matter, maybe you could...”

“Go take care of it.”

“Um, yes, Chengzhu. Okay. Then, I’ll be going now.”

He stood there for a few more seconds.

“.....”

“.....”



Black Water scoffed. “That’s it? He just won’t come out of his room?”

“No, he—”

“You should’ve just walked in.”

At the thought, Yin Yu’s face went pale. “I don’t think that’s wise.”

“If you don’t do it, I will.”

“No—” Exasperated, Yin Yu fiddled with his braid. “That’s not the end of it. I did manage to get him out of the room, eventually.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

Yin Yu sighed weakly. “Well...”



Yin Yu took in a deep breath in front of the door of Hua Cheng’s room, raised a mallet to the massive gong in his opposite hand, and proceeded to loudly ring it, counting the seconds.

DONG-DONG-DONG-DONG-DONG-DONG-DONG—

Thirty-nine ...forty...forty-one...forty-two...forty-th—

“What,” Hua Cheng said finally, barely making an effort to raise his voice above the cacophony.

Gasping with exertion, lowering the gong and the mallet, Yin Yu panted out a reply: “I’m sorry... Chengzhu...it’s been a few days...the zoning matter is escalating, we...we *really* do need your presence this time...”

Silence.

Desperate, Yin Yu lifted the mallet again and proceeded to ring the gong even louder:

DONG-DONG-DONG-DONG-DONG—*wheeze*—DONG-DONG-DONG—

“I told you to deal with it yourself.”

Yin Yu stopped ringing the gong, but his brow twitched. “I’ve tried...”

“Then stop being incompetent.”

“.....” Yin Yu swallowed a swell of unfairness, steadying himself. It was actually extremely rare to hear a comment like this from Hua Cheng, unless he’d *really* done something wrong, so he was certain now that Hua Cheng was trying to chase him away. Deciding to go the direct route, he put down the gong altogether.

“Chengzhu, can I come in?”

“Do whatever you want.”

Yin Yu opened the door and stepped in.

Hua Cheng was reclining on his bed. There was a pile of scrolls next to him, but he wasn’t reading any of them at the moment. He seemed to be lying on his side, dressed in an unkempt and frayed inner robe, staring with a bored and resentful look at Yin Yu as he entered.

“What,” he said dully.

Glad that he’d had the foresight to put his mask on before entering, so it properly hid his look of horror at the scene before him, Yin Yu bowed his head. “My apologies for disturbing your rest, my Lord. I wouldn’t insist unless it was truly urgent.”

Letting out a slow, annoyed breath, Hua Cheng sat up, hanging his legs over the been. “Fine. Let’s go.” He stood and walked towards the door—

“Um—uh—” In his shock, Yin Yu lost the servile attitude. “My Lord, um, shouldn’t you—I mean, perhaps my Lord would like to dress in something more...?”

“I don’t care.”

Finally, Yin Yu crumbled. He blocked the door, shoved his mask aside, and looked desperately into Hua Cheng’s eyes. “Chengzhu, you can’t go out like this.”

“Why not.”

“You can’t be seen like this.”

Hua Cheng gave a glance down at the frayed inner robe, not seeming to care at all. Seeing that Yin Yu wouldn’t budge, however, he snapped his fingers and changed outfits.

“.....”

He changed outfits to a lumpy peasant costume, stained and patched up with rags.

“.....” Yin Yu almost lost his mind. “...my Lord, what is that?”

Hua Cheng narrowed his eyes, but the look had no bite to it. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Perhaps my Lord would pick out one of his usual red robes?” Yin Yu coaxed. “They’re quite imposing. It can be a simple one, easy to conjure up with a little spiritual energy, not a problem at all...”

With a snap of his fingers, Hua Cheng changed again. In an instant, he was wearing red.

He was wearing what looked like a red sack-cloth, rough and poorly stitched, draping over him like a hideous blob.

Yin Yu almost spat blood. He’d never seen this little effort put into any outfit, even from the most low-level ghosts, so what was this?! Finally, he sighed and shook his head.

“It’s...all right, Chengzhu. I’ll be right back.”

He walked off. When he returned, he had a bundle of regular clothing, not spun from spiritual energy, in his arms. He held out the first item, a cheap but clean tunic with embroidery emblazoned across the back:

GHOST CITY 250TH ANNIVERSARY MUDSLIDE RECOVERY TEAM

“Um, you can wear it with this outer robe over it.” Yin Yu lifted another piece of clothing. “So the writing won’t be noticed.”

“Your clothing won’t fit me.”

“Then maybe you should switch to one of your tw—I mean, one of your smaller forms?”

Like a tired little kid, just doing what he was told, Hua Cheng took the clothing and walked over behind a screen to change. When he came out, though, he was still in his regular form. The borrowed trousers went a little above his ankles, and the outer robe seemed a bit tight, but really it wasn’t too bad—so Yin Yu held his tongue.

What he wasn’t silent on, however, was—

“Wait, Chengzhu, what happened to your hair? It’s all matted...”

“Yin Yu,” Hua Cheng said—this time with a dangerous tone, a hint of the usual ghost king that Yin Yu knew and feared, making him freeze in terror. “I’m just going out into the street to give some useless trash their instructions. Stop playing around.”

You’re the one who’s playing around!, Yin Yu cried out in his head, but held his tongue.

.

It was only later that afternoon, when he was in front of his makeshift altar, that Yin Yu spoke his mind.

“Even though he came along, he didn’t say anything,” Yin Yu complained, as he tucked the incense sticks into the censer. “He just stood there next to me, not even looking at the ghosts. That was enough to scare the stall-owners into complying, but what if they hadn’t complied? Would Hua Cheng even have done anything? What if he’d just kept standing there, or turned around and walked away? Ghost city is a pack of wolves; if he doesn’t impose his authority, he’s finished.”

As always, the Crown Prince statue didn’t reply. It only gazed thoughtfully out, unmoving.

“But that’s not the worst part,” Yin Yu said, lowering his eyes and his voice. “After that, we came back, and I managed to convince him to let me help with his hair. I put it over a bucket, and combed and combed, and it took forever to get all the tangles out. I don’t think he’d brushed it in days. And the whole time, he just...sat there, saying nothing, like he was dead. He’s never acted like this, I don’t know what’s going on.”

He pressed his hands together and begged:

“Please, please, please...for Chengzhu’s—no, for *Hua Cheng*’s sake—your Highness, if you’re alive out there, somewhere, anywhere...”



Naturally, Yin Yu didn’t include the part where he prayed to a useless statue, but Black Water still snapped impatiently:

“You’re not his mother. How he dresses is irrelevant to me. As long as he sends reinforcements to help with my territory, I don’t care if he shows up naked.”

“Don’t try your luck, My Lord,” Yin Yu muttered.

Black Water glared. “Don’t be insolent. Get my message through. That’s it.”

Yin Yu didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry. “Get your message through? It’s not that I can’t tell him about it. I can stand in front of him and shout it in his face, day and night, and he *still* won’t lift a hand.”

“How can you be so sure.”

Yin Yu rubbed his forehead. “Well...”



Yin Yu painstakingly worked his way through a tangle in Hua Cheng’s hair, massaging a dollop of oily tonic into the mess. It was the only thing Hua Cheng would really leave his room for anymore, so Yin Yu tried to do it at *least* once every two days, practically dragging the ghost king down to the bathroom. If he didn’t, he knew that Hua Cheng might simply stay in bed the entire day.

This time, though, he had a trick up his sleeve.

“I thought Chengzhu might like to know a key piece of information,” Yin Yu said, pouring a bowl of water over Hua Cheng’s inky-black hair.

Hua Cheng blinked, which was as much of a response as Yin Yu had come to expect, so he went on.

“Generals Nan Yang and Xuan Zhen are having a joint patrol,” he said. “Both of them in the same place. It’s through a narrow mountain pass, too, so there won’t be many junior officials around.”

He moved onto another knot in Hua Cheng’s hair, waiting eagerly for his response.

But Hua Cheng said nothing.

“...um...” Yin Yu stammered. “My Lord, did you hear me just now?”

“En.”

“Aren’t you going to—you know—do something about it?”

“Why.”

Yin Yu couldn’t believe his ears. Why?! More like, why not?! Tormenting Feng Xin and Mu Qing’s patrol was practically one of Hua Cheng’s favorite activities, sending scores of butterflies or even troublesome ghosts their way; it could even be called a treasured hobby of his. If Yin Yu had mentioned a joint patrol like this to Hua Cheng even a month ago, Hua Cheng would have given a smirk and even thanked Yin Yu, maybe added some snide comment—“I hope the generals enjoy their gift,” or “I wish them luck on their endeavors”—lightly running his hand along E’ming’s hilt as he strode off to make preparations.

So what was this????

“Chengzhu, but...don’t you want to send something? Anything? A...gift?”

“Whatever,” said Hua Cheng.

Yin Yu usually avoided looking at Hua Cheng too directly, but now, he really had no choice; and what he saw made his heart sink. The face that would usually emit such a chilling aura, alternately playful and petrifying, was grim and drawn. His body, which so often struck jaunty or lazily dangerous poses, laid limp and unmoving. His one eye was dull and expressionless.

.

That night, Yin Yu got drunk.

“And so Hua Chengzhu—*hic!*—” Yin Yu hiccuped. “—didn’t even...” He squinted, trying to summon up enough hand-eye coordination to stick the incense in the right place. “Didn’t even, uh...seem to care that—” Yin Yu stabbed the incense into the water bowl. “Oops. He didn’t care that Xuan Yang... that Nan Xuan...that the, the two generals are having a *joint* patrol, what is *with* that, he loves...”

Finally managing to stick the incense into the sand, he frowned.

“Oh wait, sorry, I guess those two were your...your friends, or—*hic!*—or something. Or enemies, or something. I forget. Mnn, ‘s’lots of different stories. I mean, Chengzhu hates them, he *really* hates

them, but...maybe it's like..."

He poured himself another cup of wine, then turned bleary and flush-faced to the statue.

"Oh yeah, you want some? I can make, I can offer a...wait...wait no, I think you didn't...your cultivation...whatever. What was I saying, nn, yeah...your generals, maybe 's kind of like me and Yizhen, with all the—*hic!*—weird feelings. Weird...feelings, ai. Seriously, 'm really hopeless...taizi dianxia, 'f you're out there, *hic!*, can you make sure Yizhen's okay, probably getting himself into all *sorts* of trouble. I can't help him, or Chengzhu...fuck, I'm useless...ugh...*hic—!*"

But with that last hiccup, he made a fateful mistake; he jerked against one of the flowers hanging from the lip of the vase, and tipped the vase off-balance, and spilled water all over the altar. Which would've been fine, but—

Crack!

"Oh, shit," Yin Yu mumbled, rubbing his eyes, trying to sober up. Now he'd done it. He'd gone and broken off the tip of the Crown Prince's sword, a beautifully sculpted detail of the statue, which unfortunately stuck out in a graceful jaunt to the side.

For a moment, Yin Yu considered going and confessing to Hua Cheng, showing him the broken statuette, just to get any sort of reaction out of him; but he was too drunk to process that thought any further, and slumped down at the foot of the altar. There, he curled up over the floor cushion and went to sleep, the water from the altar table still spilling off and dripping onto him.

.

The next day Hua Cheng asked him a single question, when Yin Yu stopped by his bedroom to check on him despite a throbbing headache.

"What do swans eat?" the ghost king said emptyily.

Yin Yu's head almost fell off. He was too hungover for this. "What?"

"Swans. What can they eat."

"....." Yin Yu was going to go insane on the spot. Days of catatonic answers to anything Yin Yu said, and the first thing he actually asked about was *swans*? What was with this random thought?

"Um, they can eat lettuce, or little bits of grain, I think. Why do you ask?"

Hua Cheng didn't answer anymore, so Yin Yu left it alone.



Of course, Yin Yu skipped the part where he got messy drunk in his descriptions to Black Water. In any case, Black Water was starting to get suspicious about something else.

"What if this is an impostor."

Yin Yu laughed helplessly. “What kind of impostor would do a job this bad?”

Black Water frowned darkly. “It just doesn’t make sense. I don’t see what swans have to do with anything.”

“Oh, I don’t think it really meant much. His window has a view to the reflecting pond. Swans land there sometimes to rest.”

For a few moments, Black Water paced. Then, he spoke grimly.

“Is there anything that he *has* done, or talked about, of his own will? Apart from—” He gritted his teeth. “*Swans?*”

Yin Yu scratched his cheek. “Well...”



At a certain point, Yin Yu had started to use Hua Cheng like a pair of *jiaobei*, getting through crucial Ghost City approvals through simple yes or no questions. Even *jiaobei* would’ve given clearer answers, though.

Yin Yu held up a document in front of Hua Cheng on the bed.

“En,” said Hua Cheng.

Yin Yu stamped the approval on that one and dangled the next one up.

Hua Cheng didn’t say anything.

Yin Yu put it in the rejected pile and held up another.

Hua Cheng blinked at it.

A little more insistently, Yin Yu waved it a bit.

“Whatever,” said Hua Cheng.

Yin Yu turned it towards himself, read it over, thought for a bit, and put it in the rejected pile. Then came the next one; he held it aloft.

Hua Cheng stared at it blankly

Yin Yu was just starting to move it towards the reject pile, when Hua Cheng actually said something: “Wait. I wasn’t finished reading.”

Slowly, disbelieving—he’d said *a whole sentence!*—Yin Yu moved it back. After a few moments had passed, Yin Yu decided to provide some context.

“This set of new arrivals, they’re refugees. A new sect just started flourishing in their area, so they’ve been chased off the lands. They’re requesting entry into Ghost City, but there’s too many of them, so it would be chaos if we—”

“All of them,” said Hua Cheng.

“...pardon?”

“I want all of them.” Hua Cheng made the closest thing to a facial expression than Yin Yu had seen in weeks, though it wasn’t clear to him what it was. “Have all of them come.”

“The resources that would take—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Hua Cheng said softly. “Have them all come.”

“...”

“...”

“...okay, Chengzhu.” Yin Yu put it down and stamped it carefully. “I’ll make sure of it.”

Something was wrong. It wasn’t that rare for Hua Cheng to do small acts of kindness, especially ones that appealed to a specific idea of justice that he held, or even just because he was bored; but huge, sweeping, unconditional displays of goodwill like this really weren’t this thing. It wasn’t good for him to be seen as generous, and he knew it, and Yin Yu knew it. It didn’t make sense at all.

Maybe Hua Cheng was just tired.

“Maybe we should do your hair now,” Yin Yu said. Without waiting for an answer—there wouldn’t be one—he half-pulled Hua Cheng off the bed, waiting for the slow movements of his body to catch up with the impulse.

When had the ghost king become like this? When had this become normal? Yin Yu missed Hua Cheng. He missed the *real* Hua Cheng, who was sometimes annoying and too mischievous and cruel, but at least he was something, *anything*—

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That day, when Yin Yu tried to comb through his hair, he furrowed his brows, pulling and pulling.

“Chengzhu, something’s wrong with your hair,” he said finally, setting down the brush in dumbfounded defeat. “I don’t understand, it’s like it’s...”



“—one big, black mass,” Black Water finished for him.

Yin Yu blinked. “That’s right.”

“You should’ve told me that first.” Now Black Water looked—well, ‘worried’ wasn’t an expression Black Water really wore, but it was the particular kind of sharpness that indicated concern.

“Why? It’s just tangled hair—”

“No it isn’t. Take me to see him. *Now*.”



Yin Yu ran through the halls, followed swiftly by Black Water. They made it to Hua Cheng's bedroom door. Yin Yu knocked loudly. For some reason, there was a sinking feeling in his chest.

"Chengzhu! It's—"

Black Water shoved past him, throwing the door open. "Hua *Cheng!*" he barked, then stopped.

"..."

"..."

The room was empty.

"...I don't understand," Yin Yu stammered. "Why would it be empty? He never—"

"You fool," Black Water hissed. "He—Hua Cheng—"

Yin Yu's hands were growing cold. "I, I don't understand, what do you—?"

"He—"

"WAIT!" Yin Yu cried out, pointing out the window. "He's there—he's right there."

Both of them moved to the window, looking out.

Yin Yu hadn't been mistaken. Hua Cheng was there; he was standing by the small reflecting pond outside, which was populated by a couple of swans. He had something in his hand, which he was tossing lightly out into the pond; and the swans were peacefully floating around the food, pecking at the water.

"..."

"..."

Black Water squinted. "Wait. Why is there something written on the back of his tunic? Ghost City 250th Anniversary Mudslide—?"

"Don't worry about it," Yin Yu said flatly.

"..."

"..."

"You know," Yin Yu said slowly, after a moment. "I haven't seen him do anything like that for a while. Maybe he's getting better."

"No he isn't," Black Water said. "He's getting worse."

"Worse?"

“He’s getting ready to dissipate.”

Yin Yu turned, furious, and shoved Black Water as hard as he could.

Though Black Water didn’t stumble back, he narrowed his eyes. “*What?*” he hissed.

“No he isn’t!”

“Yes he is. You’d have to be blind not to notice.”

“It’s not true. That’s impossible. Chengzhu, his obsession—” Suddenly, Yin Yu stopped, his eyes widening.

“You just realized something. What is it.”

A tremble went through Yin Yu’s body. “I...well...”



Before the bulk of everything had happened, before Yin Yu even dragged Hua Cheng out of his room for the first time, maybe just two days after the incident had happened with Black Water’s lair, Yin Yu went into Qiandeng temple.

He was checking to see where Hua Cheng was; he hadn’t seen him for a while, and he was getting confused. At this point, it hadn’t even crossed his mind that Hua Cheng might be in his bedroom; so he checked another popular haunt—this massive temple, decorated by Crown Prince statues and paintings, which Hua Cheng kept hidden through a barrier from the rest of ghost city. It was his private place of worship—a place few had seen, apart from Yin Yu.

The most important thing about this temple, at least since it had been set up, was as follows: if Hua Cheng was in Ghost City, there would always be a fresh white flower on the altar.

That day when Yin Yu visited alone, the flower was wilted. It hadn’t been changed once since Hua Cheng’s return.

Feeling odd, Yin Yu made his way out; but just as he was about to exit the front door, something caught his eye. A small Crown Prince statuette standing near the side of the door, unworshipped and alone.

Yin Yu had picked it up and run.



Once Yin Yu finished telling Black Water about the temple, they both lapsed into silence, knowing that there was nothing really left to say. Black Water was right.

Yin Yu's heart felt heavy.

They watched Hua Cheng feed the swans for a few more minutes.

“...”

“...”

Then, Yin Yu spoke again. “How long do you think until...”

He trailed off, because they'd both noticed: Hua Cheng was doing something.

Before, he'd just been feeding the swans randomly, tossing out the food in his hand without much care; but it seemed that he'd just realized that the swan in the very back wasn't getting a chance at the food. All of the other swans were black, but this one was white, and there seemed to be something wrong with its wing.

Slowly, Hua Cheng walked around the pond to where the white swan bobbed gently in the water. Then, he held out his hand.

The swan pecked at the food, then paused to drink some water before lifting its head again.

But Hua Cheng wasn't standing anymore. He'd crouched, holding out his arms, and sunk down to the level of the swan.

The swan paddled closer to Hua Cheng, then laid its small head over his shoulder. Hua Cheng wrapped his arms around it, his sleeves pressing into the feathers.

Black Water and Yin Yu watched, dead silent.

“He'll be gone by tomorrow,” Black Water said. He turned to leave. “Ghost City will fall into chaos, and you won't be able to control it, and I don't have the patience. I suggest you either come work for me or run.”

He stopped, then turned his head.

“Or *fix this*,” he said sharply. “I don't care how, but *fix it*. You know him best. Find out what the problem is, and fix it.”

Yin Yu stared dumbly after him as he walked out.



That night, Yin Yu knelt in front of the Crown Prince statue with a hollow look in his eyes. He didn't say anything, and the statue didn't say anything back. It just looked back, the smile seeming to turn a little sad from the shadows of the room, the look of it almost pleading.

After a few minutes of staring at it, Yin Yu stood and went to Hua Cheng's room.

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“Chengzhu.”

As always, Hua Cheng was lying in his bed again; he looked smaller somehow, sunk among the sumptuous red covers of his bed. The whole room was red and opulent, rather like a crow’s nest, decorated with the kind of silvery flamboyance that was uniquely Hua Cheng’s own.

But he was sunk among it all now, almost oppressed and overshadowed by it, like a butterfly that had gotten stuck and faded into death halfway out of its cocoon; there was Hua Cheng, the person, lying motionless in the bed, surrounded by traces of Hua Cheng, the *event* that had happened to Ghost City and the Heavens and the Earth. The two had once been the same thing, but they had slowly come unstuck from each other before Yin Yu’s very eyes, chrysalis and flesh ripped apart far too early for him to thrive.

“Chengzhu,” Yin Yu said again. “I’m—sorry. I haven’t—I didn’t know how to—” He balled his hands into fists. “Why are you doing this? What’s wrong? You have to tell me.”

Hua Cheng blinked, looking unsurprised, like he’d been expecting the question for a while. Then, slowly, he turned his head and spoke.

“There hasn’t been a sighting of him in two hundred years,” he said quietly.

Yin Yu listened without a word.

“Even with all the power in the world, I’m still useless,” Hua Cheng went on. “It’s not even that I’m too weak. It’s just that some things truly are impossible. It’s not His Highness’ fault; there’s no fault with him, there never was. I believe in him just as strongly as I ever have. He’s my god.”

He turned his head back, staring up at the ceiling.

“But he’s dead,” he said, even quieter. “He’s probably dead. He died before I could find him, maybe centuries ago. And I’m still here, deluding myself into thinking I’ll find him, building everything for him when it’s really just for myself. It’s pathetic. At least if my spirit passed, maybe I could be reincarnated; maybe that’s already what happened to him. They say gods don’t reincarnate, but we don’t know that. If he’s already been born into another life, and I let myself go, then maybe I can find him again; if we’re fated, that’s just how it’ll be. Maybe then, I’d finally have the chance to protect him.”

With that, he fell silent.

And Yin Yu stepped up, and spoke:

“That’s...not how it works, Chengzhu,” he said slowly, “Or, I don’t know if that’s how it works, but at least during this lifetime, it doesn’t even make sense to think like that. Because—” He grimaced. “I don’t know His Highness. But, I’m pretty sure that if he was here listening this, he wouldn’t want you to think like that. Whether or not he’s passed.”

Yin Yu hesitated, then went on:

“Besides, you *have* done something important for him. You’ve done things in his name. Ghost City, and all the tyrants you’ve defeated, and—and you’ve helped others. And you’re alive. Doesn’t that

mean something? Whether or not he's still walking around, all those things are important, and I think he'd like them. And that's...that's important, right?"

He finished weakly; but before he could try again, Hua Cheng interrupted.

"I don't want to do things in his name," he said. "I want to do things for him. He spent his whole life working for others; who cares if I do it, too? What matters is him. Nobody is going to take care of him but me. Nobody else understands who they're stepping over to have the world that they do. He's alone. If he's alone in another lifetime, that fate will follow him, and I should follow too."

"But what if he *is* still here?" Yin Yu said, getting frustrated. "What if he's here, and you dissipate and leave him alone? Being forgotten by everyone, it's a fate worse than death; what if you leave him to that?!"

"He—"

But Yin Yu had raised his voice. "Do you know what being a banished god is like? It's miserable! You're a laughingstock! It's just you, and this body that can't die peacefully, and every regret you've ever had! There's no going back from it, you don't have anybody, and if you *do* die, your memory withers away into a stupid story people tell as gossip! Do you know—Chengzhu, do you *know* what I'd give for one faithful believer, who'd—*kh*—" He was starting to get choked up. "Who'd care about me even *after* I die? Who'd leave flowers at my grave, or—or make sure people have nice homes, and tell them that there was once someone called Yin Yu, who really would've liked to see them happy? Him being the meaning of your life, it doesn't mean the meaning goes away when he does; it means he lives through you! Or, or something! Okay? Is that enough for you? Is that enough of a reason?!"

Yin Yu's eyes were blurring with tears, so he didn't see what expression what Hua Cheng was making, and he was grateful for it as he spoke his last piece:

"Also, you're my friend and I *really* don't want you to die, and Black Water doesn't either, so stop being so stupid!"

Well, that was it. Yin Yu had lost any face he had left, and so he whirled and ran back to his room.

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He just had to talk to somebody.

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With shaky hands, he lit his incense sticks.

"Don't worry, taizi dianxia," he choked out, with red eyes and a lump in his throat. "Even if he dissipates, I won't leave. I don't care if you're alive or not. We're the same, okay? We're not that different. I believe in you, too. Even if you're dead, I'll remember you until I'm dead, too. No one

else will remember us after that, but it'll be fine, we'll have had each other for a bit. Even if I've never even met you."

He stuck the incense into the censer's sand, then wiped at his eyes with his sleeve.

"But if you're out there, I'm begging you, come back. Chengzhu needs you, but even if you get here too late for that, I need you too. I *really* need you—I need to know someone else like me, who's rolled in the mud just like this, and managed to keep going. I need a friend like you, wouldn't we be friends? No one else understands what it's like but us, so, won't you come? What if you just ascend again—go on!" He laughed bitterly. "Do it! They'd all be so shocked, the heavenly officials! I'd like to see their smug faces if that happened. Ugh...it would all be so easy, if you *just*—!"

He clasped his hands together.

"Please, please, *please*—!"

The door opened, and Hua Cheng stepped in. "Yin—"

He froze.

Yin Yu also froze.

"..."

"..."

Hua Cheng had walked in looking like he was about to say something, but now his eyes were on Yin Yu and the altar. He stared at them blankly, struck dumb, with a look almost uncomprehending. His eyes moved over the altar, taking in the flowers, the water, the fruit, the statue, before settling back on Yin Yu.

Yin Yu stared back.

Then, slowly, Hua Cheng started to walk up to him, his expression unreadable.

"Um." Yin Yu cowered a little, watching the ghost king advance. "Chengzhu, this is—cough—I didn't mean to take it without asking. I thought—er, I really should've asked. Also, I'm sorry for yelling at you earlier, I didn't mean it. You can fire me, if you want? Or you can cut my salary, or—"

Hua Cheng reached out.

"—I'm sorry I'm SORRY—"

With one hand, Hua Cheng carefully picked up the statuette and blinked down at it.

Yin Yu watched with dread as Hua Cheng's gaze moved over to the broken sword. Well, this was it. Sorry, taizi dianxia; it seems there won't be much of your memory preserved by this half-rate believer after all. Yin Yu tensed, squeezing his eyes shut—

"I can fix this for you," Hua Cheng said quietly.

Yin Yu opened his eyes in shock.

Then, without another word—tucking the statue carefully into his sleeve—Hua Cheng turned to go. Yet, Yin Yu found his voice once he was halfway to the door.

“—Chengzhu, did you come to tell me something?”

Hua Cheng looked back, paused, and then shook his head.

“No,” he said simply, and left.



“AMONG THE FLOWERS, A SINGLE JUG O’ WINE!”

“I DRINK ALOOONE, NO ONE CLOSE T’ME—”

“RAISE M’CUP, INVITE THE BRIGHT MOON—

“FACIN’ MY—

“FACIN’ MY SHADOW, TOGETHER WE MAKE THREEEEE!”

The singing was beyond awful. Yin Yu was getting a headache from the clamoring ghosts; he slumped at the head of the massive table in the grand hall of paradise manor, staring glumly out from behind his mask at the raucous feast.

“”THE MOON DON’T—fuck, how’s it go—”

“MOON DOESN’T KNOW HOWTA DRINK—”

“YEAH—”

“AND MY SHADOW CAN ONLY FOLLOW M’BODY—”

“BUT FER A TIME, I MAKE MOON N’ SHADOW MY COMPANIONS—”

“TAKIN ONE’S PLEASURE MUST LAST ‘TILL SPRING!!!!!”

“YEEHOO!”

The ghosts began to get rowdy, some of them clambering up onto the tables, even stepping in the dishes.

“I SING! THE MOON WAVERS BACK N’ FORTH—”

“I DANCE! MY SHADOW FLICKERS N’ SCATTERS—

“WHEN I’M SOBER—”

“Booo—”

“WE TAKE PLEASURE TOGETHER!”

“N’ WHEN I’M DRUNK—”

Someone walked up beside Yin Yu, then spoke out in a deep and commanding voice, which rang out and echoed across the hall:

“Shut up.”

Immediately, everyone fell silent. A hush blanketed the room.

Yin Yu looked up, raising his masked face slightly, to the familiar sight of red robes.

Hua Cheng was standing next to him. His pose was sprightly, with his weight resting on one hip; he had that smoldering look in his eye that was half-boredom, half-mischief, and a touch of fire that commanded attention. Satisfied at the silence, he picked up a glass.

“I don’t let this many people into ghost city for no reason,” he said, “So listen up, and find out what your trash lives are worth.”

The ghosts scrambled for their wine cups, readying them to make a toast and looked eagerly towards Hua Cheng; it’s not like they needed a reason to drink, but having one was somehow more fun.

“You’re here in honor of my old friend,” Hua Cheng said languidly. “General Hua. As for me, I don’t give a shit what happens to you. Since he would, though, you get to stay for now. Just remember, if you cause trouble, you’re dead.”

Erupting in cheers, the ghosts downed their cups.

“WOOOOOO!”

“GOOD ENOUGH FER ME!”

“THREE CHEERS FER GENERAL HUA, SAVIOR OF GHOSTKIND!”

With that, the feast resumed, twice as rowdy as before.

Yin Yu was just slumping down to the table, ready to suffer through the rest of it, when Hua Cheng’s hand came to rest on his shoulder.

“Waning Moon,” he said. “You’re dismissed.”

His eyes bright with hope behind his mask, Yin Yu looked up. “Really? Oh, thank you, Lord—”

“Dismissed to go finish your paperwork.”

Yin Yu choked.

Hua Cheng gazed on ahead impassively, towards the feast.

Then, slowly, a smile spread across his face; and he chuckled, tapping the side of Yin Yu's seat with his boot. The silver chains hung across it clinked mischievously. "It was a joke. Go to sleep."

With a long-suffering sigh, holding his chest from relief, Yin Yu stood up; but he was smiling behind his mask, and he shook his head and finally snickered. "Okay. Thank you, Chengzhu."

"En."

Yin Yu dragged himself out of the room, but not before taking one more look back. Hua Cheng was standing still at the head of the table, his hands behind his back. Only Yin Yu could see that his hands weren't still. The ghost king was running a soft touch down the red string tied around one finger, gently, soothingly, as though comforting it.

Feeling like he'd maybe seen too much, Yin Yu left.



There was a box waiting for him in his room. Beside the box, there was a tiny note written in Hua Cheng's hand.

Yin Yu liked to think that he'd gotten better at recognizing Hua Cheng's handwriting over the years, helping him do paperwork, but this one was really hopeless; it must have been something he'd never seen Hua Cheng write before. Somehow, though, the shape of it looked really, really familiar...?

It took a few moments for the realization to hit.

An image flashed through his mind: the first character of the tattoo on Hua Cheng's arm, which could really only be the *Xie* of *Xie Lian*, which made up both the characters on this slip of paper. Which, therefore, only be *xie xie*.

The note said "thank you."

It was the first time he'd ever received those words from Hua Cheng.

Yin Yu pressed his lips together, struggling to hold something back. Then, slowly prying up the lid of the box, he looked down and faced the repaired Crown Prince statue.

Hua Cheng hadn't stopped at just repairing it. He'd sharpened the lines of it, perfecting it, making it a statue truly worthy of worship; but he'd also added something else.

On the statue's graceful neck, he'd carved in the delicate outline of a cursed shackle.



“So everything should be back to normal now, really,” Yin Yu said, taking a sip of his tea. “I think.”

“You *think*?” Black Water said coldly.

It was their weekly intelligence meeting at Black Water’s inn, in the little backroom, with a pot of tea and an atmosphere of crisis averted—a little more casual, a little more cautious.

“Well, Chengzhu will be sending your reinforcements soon, so as far as you’re concerned...”

Black Water frowned. “No. He should hold off on them for some time.”

Yin Yu’s eyebrow twitched. “You were bothering me for *weeks* and now—?”

“I’m moving to a different lair. The one I have now isn’t defensible enough; Qi Rong’s minions are getting more powerful. I need to find a better location.”

“Oh,” Yin Yu murmured. “...that’s odd. Maybe he really *will* get to be a supreme soon...?”

“No,” Black Water said. “It’s not that. Whoever’s helping him is just getting more desperate. The attacks on Ghost City have gotten worse too, from what I’ve heard, but Ghost City would be hard to breach for anyone.”

Yin Yu thought about it for a little bit, staring down into his teacup. “Hm.”

“What.”

“I guess...if they’re getting more desperate...it just feels like they know something’s about to *happen*. But what?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care,” Black Water said. “I’m not getting dragged into anyone’s mess.”

“Okay,” Yin Yu said, unconvinced.

“Tell Crimson Rain that—” Black Water flinched suddenly. “Tch. One moment. Shi Qingxuan is being insufferable.”

“Oh?”

“He’s bellowing in my ear about something.” With an irritated huff, Black Water put his fingers to his temple. “What.”

“...”

For a few moments Black Water listened. In the meantime, Yin Yu aimlessly played with his teacup, and asked with mild interest:

“What is it? What’s he saying?”

Black Water listened for a few moments more, unmoving.

Then, he slowly looked up, staring at Yin Yu across the table. Meeting his eyes with a *look*.

Yin Yu straightened. “What is it? Lord Black Water?”

“...” Black Water’s eyes were sharp and shocked.

“Lord Black Water?”

Chapter End Notes

OOOOOH BOOOY I WONDER WHAT HAPPENED WHEEEEEEEEE

THIS IS IT, ONE MORE CHAPTER!!!! HOPEFULLY this one will not take three months this time *LAUGHTRACK PLAYS*

ALSO I SAY THIS A LOT BUT THANK U FOR THE SUPPORT!!! i have been SHOOK by just how much ppl ask me about this fic, ur nice comment make my heart so big and hard. POOR YIN YU IS LOVED BY SO MANY.....

BTW, the obnoxious drinking song is actually this [POEM](#) "Drinking Alone with the Moon" by Tang poet Li Bo. THANKS GOOGLE

THATS IT SEE YALL NEXT TIME!!!!

TWITTER PROMO: [HERE](#)

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Slowly, Black Water lowered his fingers from his temple and stared at Yin Yu across the table.

Yin Yu stared back. No words were needed, but he still fumbled some out.

“It can’t be.”

“It is.”

“It’s a mistake.”

Black Water’s eyes were full of something unfathomable. “It’s not.”

The two of them continued to stare at each other, like two children suddenly in possession of a terrible secret. For an instant, there was no hierarchy between them; they were both equal in their shock, until Yin Yu blurted out what they were both thinking:

“He’s going to go insane. He’s, he’s going to go insane—”

“We’re going to have to tell him.”

“He’s going to go insane. Oh my god.”

“We have to go quickly.”

“He’s—he’s going to—”

“Let’s go,” Black Water said sharply, standing up. “If we’re late with this, he’ll kill us.”

“He might kill us either way,” Yin Yu breathed. “Just to get us out of the way, to go see him—he’s *really* going to go insane—is it safe to go in person for something like this?”

But Black Water’s expression only hardened. “I’m going to tell him in person. If you’re afraid, stay here.”

Yin Yu knew why he wanted to go, of course. It wasn’t in his eyes (when could anything Black Water was thinking ever show in his eyes?), but it was the same reason that Yin Yu eventually got up and nodded.

After all, in this world, when did anyone ever get what they wanted?

Yin Yu had only ever lived like this—forgetting that *hope* was supposed to be hope for something concrete, and not a wistful old story he told himself to sleep at night so that the pleasant feeling of it could linger in the morning. It had seemed that this was the only way to exist, believing in a dream so distant and unattainable that it might as well be a god. He’d never seen somebody get their god. He wondered what it would look like.



And so the Waning Moon officer returned to the manor, coming in through a side entrance, with another masked officer behind him; he returned quietly, giving no sign that this was anything other than business as usual. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary to the few ghosts who lingered there. A few eyed the stranger in the mask behind him, but only tittered among themselves and went about their business.

Yin Yu barely dared to breathe until he was through the door, and upon crossing the threshold, he nearly collapsed. His heart was pounding; sweat beaded behind the cool porcelain of the mask. Had any of the ghosts noticed? Some of them were animals, after all. It wouldn't be out of the question for them to smell fear, to detect the minute trembling in Yin Yu's—

"Hold it together," Black Water snapped. "What's your problem."

Yin Yu pushed his mask aside, wiping at his sweat. "It's going to have to be a secret, right? Chengzhu wouldn't want anyone to know about his purpose, or they'll all go after His Highness. Is His Highness strong enough to withstand an attack? Or—"

"Stop thinking. Show me where he is, let's go."

"Right," Yin Yu breathed, and shoved his mask back on before proceeding. Hua Cheng was probably in the main hall at this hour, so he started down towards it.

What would Hua Cheng look like when he got the news? What would happen afterwards? With news like that, Hua Cheng might turn into a whole new person. Yin Yu imagined a jubilant Hua Cheng giving them a hug for the news, and thought it unlikely; but with something like this, who could even know? Maybe it would be the opposite, and he'd kill them both for knowing about his interest in Xie Lian.

But Hua Cheng's interest in Xie Lian—Yin Yu didn't know too much about that, either. He was always too afraid to pry. Would Hua Cheng want to rush out and offer himself sweetly to His Highness? Or was this the sort of sick obsession that would lead to the darkest outcome? He imagined Hua Cheng going out with his strongest allies, returning with a god in chains, stealing him away for unspeakable purposes. At the thought, Yin Yu shuddered. If it was really something so terrifying, Yin Yu would have to intervene—or at least, that's what he told himself. In reality, when would he ever be so brave?

"Are you going to tell him, or should I?" Yin Yu blurted out, as he made his way down the hall. "I can do it, if—"

"I'll take care of it."

Yin Yu let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you, my Lord—"

"You'd mess it up."

"..." Yin Yu gave a deadpan look behind his mask. "...thank you, my Lord."

But that was all the time they had to speak, because they'd reached the side-entrance of the main hall. Before Yin Yu could even stop to think, they were through it.

And there he was, Hua Cheng, on the divan in the center of the room.

The ghost king was carelessly swirling a jade cup in his hand. It was probably fine wine. He was overseeing a lucrative deal between wine merchants, which Yin Yu had arranged himself the week prior. Hua Cheng had a particularity about wine: he was intent on finding brewers that used ancient methods. They both knew he meant the Xianle methods, though it wasn't said outright. From the bored look on Hua Cheng's face, it seemed this taste hadn't been quite what he was searching for, so he lounged lazily.

Yin Yu's heart throbbed as he stared at him, at the Hua Cheng that didn't know that his life was about to take a turn—this version of the ghost king who he'd known for so many years, who would never exist again.

Then, he stepped forward.

"My Lord," he said, a bit shakily.

Hua Cheng didn't move his gaze from the deal going on. "What."

"My Lord."

At that, Hua Cheng finally looked—and sat up immediately at the sight of Black Water standing masked and tall behind Yin Yu. His eyes flashed.

Black Water never came to deliver news in person.

For a moment, Hua Cheng was discomposed. Then, standing up smoothly, he spoke to an attendant. "Everybody out."

Merchants and observers alike looked up in shock.

"Huh?"

"What?!"

"But—bargaining's almost finished!"

"How come—"

"The wine is cheap," the attendant said, hiding her smile behind her sleeve. "Hua Chengzhu is patient, but not so patient to watch bargaining over something like *this* take place here. Please, conduct your trade elsewhere."

She'd made the story up as she went along, but Hua Cheng could hardly be bothered. He only gave a single scary look, and everyone immediately scrambled.

"Of course, milord!"

"Thanks for yer opinion!"

"Thank you—"

"Everybody out," Hua Cheng said again, sharper, and they fled. Then, he looked to the attendant. "Everybody."

With a nod, the attendant waved over the rest of the servants and filed out. At last, they were left alone.

Yin Yu's heart throbbed.

As Hua Cheng turned around, Yin Yu pushed his mask aside, revealing the flushed and sweaty face underneath. When Black Water removed his own, setting it on a table, his expression was sharp but steady.

Hua Cheng took one look at their faces and stepped forward, with a look so startling that Yin Yu could've whimpered. "What."

"Hua Cheng," said Black Water.

"I know it's about him. You've said it with your face. So *what is it*."

Black Water kept speaking evenly. "His Royal Highness, the Crown Prince—"

Hua Cheng interrupted, pale and grim, hissing between his teeth. "If he's dead, just say it—"

"—has ascended to the heavens for a third time."

Yin Yu's heart throbbed so painfully that he nearly wobbled. He couldn't tear his gaze away from Hua Cheng; he felt a giddy urge to laugh, but was too terrified.

Hua Cheng stared for a whole five seconds, as though he'd just been shattered. His lips parted.

"Ascended," he said, blankly.

Black Water didn't respond, but Hua Cheng kept going:

"Don't speak without proof—"

"He's in the array," Black Water said, raising a finger to his temple. "He's in the array right now. If you want to listen—"

Hua Cheng practically threw himself forward, crossing the space between them in an instant, so suddenly that Yin Yu flinched—the kind of speed that would normally be followed by a deadly strike. Instead, however, he pressed his fingers to Black Water's temple.

He remained there quietly for a few seconds. Listened, expressionless.

Then, slowly, his hand slipped down to hang at his side.

Black Water was watching him with the closest thing he had to curiosity, a steady focus that lingered on Hua Cheng's face. Then—

Hua Cheng grabbed Black Water's collar in his fist, his expression darker than Yin Yu had ever seen it. "You have a campaign against the heavens."

Black Water didn't flinch. "Not against him."

"He's in the heavens."

"He won't be involved."

“A promise isn’t enough.”

“What else do you want.”

“Shouldn’t I just kill you?”

But Yin Yu could hear that the words didn’t have any bite, and Black Water knew it too. He responded in turn:

“Our arrangement hasn’t changed.”

Hua Cheng didn’t let go.

Black Water lowered his voice. “I’ll help you keep him safe, Hua Cheng.”

Silence.

Then, slowly, Hua Cheng let go. He stood still for a few moments before pacing slowly back to the divan. The sound of his steps echoed in the vast and empty hall.

Yin Yu came forward, afraid that Hua Cheng might actually collapse; but instead, Hua Cheng sat heavily on the divan and stared off into some unknown distance. Though his eyes were fixed and a bit glassy, his voice came out clear.

“That’s why we’re being attacked,” he murmured. “Somebody could sense this was going to happen. It has to be someone powerful.”

Black Water folded his hands into his sleeves. “We can’t be certain.”

“Somebody wanted us out of the way.”

“They might know about your interest in His Highness.”

“They don’t. If they did, I would be in more trouble. They’re just trying to sow disorder in the ghost world, clear the way for something.”

“It might be related to Tonglu.”

Both ghost kings had long toiled to find out who controlled Mount Tonglu. Thus far, they hadn’t found an answer.

“It might be,” Hua Cheng said quietly. “Black Water.”

“Mm.”

“If His Highness descends to the mortal world, send word immediately. I need to know where he goes. As soon as this news reaches Qi Rong, he’ll attack.”

Black Water nodded. “Anything else?”

Hua Cheng shook his head. He’d gone quiet.

After a moment, Black Water nodded. “Good luck.”

Hua Cheng's lips made a small movement, like he'd meant to speak but hadn't thought of anything to say. In the end, he just nodded wordlessly.

With that, Black Water picked up his mask again and headed out the beaded curtain of the main entrance; but when Yin Yu crossed his hands behind his back and followed silently after him—

"Yin Yu," Hua Cheng said quietly. "You stay."

Pausing, Yin Yu turned around.

Hua Cheng remained just where he'd sat, a tiny red figure alone in the vastness of the main hall.

In the silence, Yin Yu turned and walked. He made his way through the hall, up the stairs to the platform. His steps echoed; they were the only sound. Hua Cheng was silent.

It took a few moments for Yin Yu to reach Hua Cheng. When he did, he stood by the divan, looking down at him, and spoke gently.

"Yes, Chengzhu?"

It was the first thing he'd said in the entire encounter, and his voice felt odd in the echo of the empty space.

Hua Cheng didn't look up at him as he spoke, his own voice a monotone:

"When I first hired you, I told you that you could cut and run whenever. That I didn't care about loyalty."

Yin Yu nodded, a bit surprised that he'd remembered. "...that's right."

"Things are going to get more dangerous now. It's not like before; if you choose to stay, you can't just leave randomly. I can't take any risks on someone if they aren't reliable. If you want to get out, it's time."

For a few moments, Yin Yu just stared. Then, slowly, he dared to turn and sit down on the divan next to him.

"Of course I'm staying," he said, folding his hands in his lap.

But Hua Cheng shook his head. "Give me one good reason to think you won't run when it gets bad."

Yin Yu looked down, thinking for a moment, before responding slowly.

"...I've done a lot of just surviving," he said finally. "I want it to mean something. If Hua Chengzhu respects His Highness this much, then he's probably someone worth admiring, and definitely someone worth protecting. And Black Water said the heavens were already scorning him."

"They're trash," Hua Cheng said, low and dangerous.

"...I know," Yin Yu mumbled. "I remember what it felt like, being out of place there. He's probably feeling the same way. It's not pleasant."

There was a pause, and Yin Yu cleared his throat before stammering out the most embarrassing part.

"...My Lord, I also, really..."

I want to see you happy.

“...I’d like to help you achieve your goals. Cough, cough...you’ve done a lot for me. More than you really...would be expected to, so...”

“All right,” Hua Cheng interrupted, without much fanfare. “Then stay.”

Still, Yin Yu could tell that something in him had loosened. If there was one language that Hua Cheng could understand better than luck, after all, it was loyalty. It would be presumptuous for Yin Yu to imagine that Hua Cheng trusted him—really, was there anyone Hua Cheng trusted?—but he had the sense that he’d been given something similar.

The thought was a bit of a thrill. It wasn’t often that Yin Yu felt that he’d truly excelled at something, and it made him want to do even better. The feeling was almost embarrassing; how far would he go to help someone with a purpose that wasn’t his own, for an end that wasn’t to his benefit—just to feel like he’d done something right? Wasn’t it pathetic?

But it would be so *satisfying*, to see Hua Cheng reunited with his purpose. When Yin Yu watched Hua Cheng strive, he could dream; he didn’t have to be himself at all. He could just be two eyes behind a mask, two hands used as tools, just one more cog in the machine of Hua Cheng’s purpose. Yin Yu didn’t mind, though. He liked it a lot. It was much better than being Yin Yu.

It might be pathetic, Yin Yu thought to himself with a sigh, but at least it wasn’t unkind.

He gave Hua Cheng a few moments of silence before looking over again. The ghost king had been quiet for a few minutes; he sat with his chin propped in his hand, pondering.

“Are you going to go see him?” Yin Yu said, without thinking.

Hua Cheng blinked.

“—I meant, so I can prepare, my Lord,” Yin Yu fumbled, standing quickly. “If you want, I can—”

“I can’t go to the heavens to see him,” Hua Cheng said quietly. “He might find that alarming. He doesn’t even know who I am.”

“But when he descends, you’ll go?”

Hua Cheng was quiet a little longer, something smoldering in his eye—the strangest look Yin Yu had ever seen him wear, like guilty reluctance. “Not like this,” he muttered.

He didn’t gesture towards anything, but the meaning was clear. *Not as Crimson Rain Sought Flower.*

But there wouldn’t be time to choose, because in that moment, Black Water’s voice boomed through an array into Yin Yu’s ears: “*He’s been sent down on a mission.*”

Yin Yu flinched in surprise, then quickly pressed his fingers to his temple. “Are you sure? Where?”

Hua Cheng looked up immediately, tense and expectant, as Yin Yu’s expression dropped. Once Black Water finished explaining, Yin Yu lowered his hand and sighed.

“Where is he,” Hua Cheng said tersely.

“Xuan Ji’s mess,” Yin Yu replied.



When Hua Cheng returned, Yin Yu didn't have to ask if he'd seen His Highness. Hua Cheng was lit up in a manner that Yin Yu had never seen; he radiated confidence like a furnace about to burn up, eyes blazing, jewelry clinking wild and loose as he walked. A couple of stray silver butterflies were lingering around his shoulders; he didn't even seem to notice them, as he clasped his hands behind his back and swept in.

"When he descends again, tell me immediately," he said, without stopping in his stride.

"Yes, My Lord."

The time, indeed, came; but when Yin Yu received word from Black Water and went to Hua Cheng's room to inform him, he found a red-clad youth in the room, leaning forward to inspect his face in the mirror. Standing in the doorway, Yin Yu cleared his throat.

"Where," Hua Cheng said, quickly turning away from the mirror. He'd chosen a good form, Yin Yu thought; innocent, fresh-faced, nonthreatening.

"Near a small village named Puqi," Yin Yu said, "But that's not all. Qi Rong's minions somehow found out he's descended, too. They're headed his way."

Hua Cheng laughed coldly. "Let them come."

After that, Yin Yu didn't hear from either Hua Cheng or Black Water for some time. It was a bit unsettling, but there was still work to do; Ghost City wouldn't run itself. Yin Yu kept busy.

A few days later, Hua Cheng returned.

If the first time, he'd simply come back glowing, this time he was outright on fire. There was something else, too—a human quality to him that suited him oddly. He seemed concerned with how he looked, glancing at himself in windows when he passed them, absentmindedly smoothing his hair down. Once, he even called for Yin Yu for advice.

"Which of these two," he said, and switched between two similar red robes.

Flabbergasted though he was, Yin Yu kept his face straight. "...can I see again?"

One, two.

"...the second one, Chengzhu..."



But of course, things couldn't possibly go so smoothly forever. Yin Yu was nursing a cup of tea, exhausted from a long week of reconnaissance, when Hua Cheng's voice echoed in his head.

Yin Yu, return to paradise manor. There's a problem.

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There was the corpse of a god on the floor of the room.

"I'm going to ask you one more time," Hua Cheng said, crossing his arms. "You made this my problem *why*."

Black Water scowled. "It wasn't my intention for—"

"I didn't ask what your intention was, I asked why you made this my problem. I don't have the free time to deal with your bullshit anymore. Your pet wasn't my responsibility."

"He was the one who escaped!" Black Water thundered. "If I'd seen him go through the distance shortening array after me—"

"After he escaped from wherever you kept him."

"He must have had help."

Hua Cheng smiled coldly. "Of course. I'm sure you helped him plenty by leaving him unguarded, letting him slip through your array, then allowing him run free in my territory long enough to set off an ascending fire dragon to call for help."

"And then you killed him?" Yin Yu said weakly.

The other two ignored him; the fact that Earth Master had died along the way was incidental.

"What do you want me to do about it?" Black Water said stonily. "I can't undo it."

Seeming to grow bored of taunting Black Water, Hua Cheng tossed his dice in his hand. "Hm," he mused. "Maybe they'll send His Highness to come investigate—"

"Why did you kill him?!" Yin Yu blurted out. He'd been staring with weary horror at the thing on the floor, but the horror had soon turned to anger.

He Xuan glanced at him like a child who'd spoken out of line. "I warned him not to try escaping—"

"Why wouldn't he escape? Anyone would escape, if you kept him in a place like yours!"

Annoyance came into Black Water's voice. "I told him I would release him when I succeeded in taking my revenge. All he had to do was stay quiet and help me learn his Earth Master skills."

"But he didn't even do anything!" Yin Yu was getting angrier. "You stole his place in the heavens, and then his freedom—isn't that what was done to you? Who wouldn't try to run?"

Seeing that an argument had broken out, Hua Cheng languidly spun one of his dice on his finger and said nothing.

"What do you care?" Black Water snapped.

“If Wind Master gets in the way, will you kill him too?” Yin Yu’s face was going red. “Would that satisfy you? Or do you want to kill anyone else first? Let’s just murder everyone who gets in our way, who gives a fuck—”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Then maybe you’re not so smart after all.”

The two were in each other’s faces, about to come to blows, when Black Water finally said the thing to make Yin Yu snap:

“Hua Cheng, call off your servant.”

Yin Yu punched him in the stomach.

Black Water was like steel, and the fist bounced off, causing more damage to Yin Yu than to him, but Yin Yu didn’t care; his memory was already working, his body springing into a battle stance he hadn’t used for hundreds of years, when—

“All right,” Hua Cheng said finally, seizing him by the back of his collar. “Let’s take a break.”

“Chengzhu! But he—”

“Let’s go outside and talk for a second.”

Black Water watched them darkly as they left, and then the door was shut, and the two were left in the hallway.

Hua Cheng let go of him and crossed his arms, waiting.

Yin Yu was still huffing and puffing, embarrassingly angry—why had he gotten so angry? He wasn’t sure. His trembling hands curled into fists. “You should’ve let me—”

“You’d end up right next to the real Earth Master on the floor.”

“Doesn’t this bother you?!”

Hua Cheng raised a brow.

At that, Yin Yu finally calmed down—not out of a sense of real peace, but rather out of helplessness. Of course they didn’t care; they were ghosts, fixated on their goals. One more death was less than nothing to them.

For the first time in a while, Yin Yu felt alone—completely, piercingly alone. Tears started prickling at his eyes. It was so embarrassing; why was he like this over nothing? In his desperation, he risked saying something dangerous.

“What would His Highness think about this?” Yin Yu blurted out. “About you helping someone do this?”

At that, Hua Cheng’s expression turned unreadable. He didn’t kill Yin Yu on the spot, though. In fact, he did something even more unexpected: he explained.

“Yin Yu,” he said quietly. “It’s not bad to feel upset over an innocent person, but this isn’t about what’s right or wrong. It’s a practical matter. You’re right that His Highness would be precisely the type to disapprove of this and get in the way, just like you, so naturally Black Water would kill him without a thought. That’s why I have to do this. Black Water isn’t my friend; he’s my enemy, and it’s said that enemies should be kept even closer than friends.”

Astonished though he was, Yin Yu shook his head. “I just thought...”

“Don’t think,” Hua Cheng said. “Just do as I say. Go take a break. I’ll tell you if His Highness comes to us; if he does, I’ll need your help.”

Yin Yu nodded. The fight had gone out of him, and he didn’t want to deal with the thing on the other side of the door anymore; but as Hua Cheng opened the door and went in, Yin Yu caught a glimpse of the scene within as it closed.

Black Water was standing over the dark shape on the floor, holding something in his hand. Blood was dripping down his chin.

Then the door slid shut, and Yin Yu was left alone.



His Highness came.

Yin Yu could tell where he was from a mile away, by the commotion that had formed in the streets. He’d gotten to the gambler’s den too late to catch him in time, but just in time to hear the rumors start to spread: did you see that cultivator in white? Walked right up to Hua Cheng, gambled on a half-eaten bun—!

The shouts that he heard in the street this time were different, however.

“Hey, hey, hey! Let’s teach this pretty boy a thing or two!”

“How dare he start shit in ghost city!”

Yin Yu turned immediately, sweat beading under his mask, and followed the sound of the commotion, until—there!

“Settle down. Let him go!” Yin Yu called out, making his way through the parting crowd of ghosts.

And there he was. Xie Lian turned to him.

Yin Yu bowed. “Greetings, Daozhang. Chengzhu wishes to see you.”

“Huh? Me?” Xie Lian pointed at himself.

So this was Xie Lian, Yin Yu thought to himself.

He’d long wondered about the kind of person who His Highness was. The image he’d decided upon was quite scary: if there was someone who the terrible, deadly-powerful Hua Cheng valued above life

itself, respected about all others, then surely it was somebody just as powerful, if not more. Yin Yu had expected an ancient and powerful god, awful and bitter from his centuries of ridicule, at least twice as terrifying as his most slavishly devoted believer.

But of course, someone who inspired such insane devotion—wouldn't it make sense that he'd be endearing? Of course he'd be a plain little scrap god who got mixed up in street quarrels for knocking over someone's stand by accident. His hat was askew.

Yin Yu's spirit lifted, and he felt almost fond.

"Yes. Chengzhu has been waiting for you at Paradise Manor."

You can't possibly imagine for long.

As he led Xie Lian through the streets. Yin Yu let his sleeve flutter up to reveal his cursed shackle. It had been by Hua Cheng's orders, of course, part of the ruse that would lead Xie Lian to find the false Earth Master; but Yin Yu felt a little rush upon doing so anyway. It was like a message.

Look, Your Highness. You're not the only one.

Hua Cheng quietly spoke orders into his array, and Yin Yu followed them to the letter—leaving Xie Lian at the entrance, walking by his room again later to coax him into following him. Making sure he clearly displayed the move with the dice that would open Xie Lian's way to Black Water.

Come along, Your Highness.

And then, of course, Xie Lian burnt the manor down.

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Hua Cheng stood among the smoldering embers, unmoving. The fire hadn't taken too long to go out, but a substantial part of the manor was still a wreck.

Yin Yu walked up next to him, waving ash away from his face. "Chengzhu, there you are. Sigh, something like this really..."

But stopped abruptly, noticing something.

Hua Cheng's hands were trembling.

"...Chengzhu? What's wrong?"

Hua Cheng didn't answer.

"It's okay," Yin Yu said lamely. "We can rebuild it really fast—"

"His Highness' arm," Chengzhu said, almost spitting. The anguish in his eyes had hardened to a bitter self-hatred.

"His...arm?" Yin Yu echoed.

Hua Cheng shook his head, cursed under his breath, and strode away.



Dealing with the mess took up all of Yin Yu's time energy for the following week; he received sporadic updates from Hua Cheng, but that was all.

The one person he didn't hear from anymore was Black Water.

It seemed that the fight between them had been some kind of breaking point. Yin Yu tried to convince himself that *he* was the one deciding not to reach out; he'd had enough of Black Water's indiscriminate killing, sick to his stomach of it all, making the right choice to avoid reaching out again. How could he talk to someone who he couldn't relate to in the slightest?

But Black Water didn't reach out, either. So maybe he was also mad.

It was strange, knowing that Black Water might be furious at him. Yin Yu broke out in a cold sweat when he considered it; it had never been his goal to make an enemy, much less a powerful one like this. But they weren't really enemies yet.

Right?

Black Water *would* kill him without even a thought, if Yin Yu stood in his way. Yin Yu knew this. But he hadn't *really* stood in his way yet, and they'd had so many conversations together, fought together, dealt with Hua Cheng together—that counted for something, didn't it? Plus, Black Water couldn't be *that* upset. It was just words, they'd just traded barbs. Didn't Hua Cheng insult him all the time? Yin Yu's insults were gentle, too gentle, practically compliments compared to the kind of tongue-lashing Hua Cheng regularly unleashed. So maybe Black Water wasn't even angry, maybe he just didn't have any news, so naturally he wouldn't reach out. Never mind that he'd started passing information directly to Hua Cheng instead of Yin Yu. But maybe it was more convenient like that.

Yin Yu hadn't done anything *wrong*, he'd just pointed out that Black Water had killed someone innocent—what was wrong about that?! Nothing! Nothing at all! Everyone *else* was just insane here, it wasn't Yin Yu.

Whatever, he thought glumly, as he finished arranging his room in the newly rebuilt paradise manor. Hua Cheng would deal with it. Not Yin Yu's problem anymore.

Until it was.



Hua Cheng's voice came over the array one day, sounding more tense than usual.

“Yin Yu,” he said. “It’s gotten dangerous.”

“Hm?” Yin Yu sat up from his bed, rubbing his eyes. “What? What’s going...”

“Black Water put his plan into motion, and His Highness got involved.”

“What?!” Yin Yu blinked, suddenly awake. “How?!”

“Wind Master came over, and—forget it, it doesn’t matter. I have to keep His Highness distracted, he can’t go up to the heavens to keep investigating. Send my step-litter to the terrace of cascading wine —“

“But Black Water—can’t he—didn’t you talk to him?”

“...”

“...”

Silence.

Then—

“We had a fight,” Hua Cheng said tersely.

Yin Yu swung his legs out of bed and walked to the window, furring his brow. “But you always fight, what’s different this time?”

“Communication with him just won’t be fruitful anymore, that’s all.”

Hua Cheng was trying to make it sound like it wasn’t any big deal, but a chill went through Yin Yu. From the sound of it, they’d lost Black Water as an ally. This was *bad*.

Yin Yu sighed. “Do you want me to try talking to him?” .

“Not for now,” Hua Cheng replied. “If it comes to that, I’ll tell you.”

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“Yin Yu.”

The next time Hua Cheng’s voice came over his array, Yin Yu was taking a stroll beside the pond in front of paradise manor. Even ghost city had grown quiet at this hour, save for a faint chatter in the distance.

Yin Yu knew instantly what he was being called for, but he still paused beside the lake to ask. “Yes, Chengzhu?”

“He won’t listen to me.” Hua Cheng’s voice sounded crackly, like there was some kind of interference. “We’re all drifting towards his new lair. I can barely get a promise from him, I can barely get two words out of him. I need you to try talking to him.”

“My Lord, I’ll try, but—if you failed, what makes you think that I’ll do any better?”

“He always respected you more than he respected me. There’s no time, we’ll lose the connection soon. Just hurry up and try.”

Then the connection was cut off, and there was silence.

Yin Yu swallowed hard. He’d thought about this for so long, made conversations in his head, but his mind was blank now. Convince a supreme-level ghost to abandon his purpose? What was this?

Still, he mumbled out Black Water’s verbal password and entered.

“Lord Bla—“ He choked on his spit a little. “Black Water.”

Silence.

“Um, hi again. Uh, we haven’t spoken for a while, since—well, you know, *that* happened. Sorry about that. Kind of, not exactly. Um...”

There was dead silence on the other end.

Flushing red, Yin Yu cleared his throat. “Okay. Um, sorry, I don’t know where to start. I just think you...shouldn’t. Keep going to get revenge, I mean. Or else, it’ll...”

Finally, his frustration welled up and broke through the mess.

“Okay, wait. I’m starting over. You know what, I’m *not* sorry for yelling at you back then.”

Dead silence.

Yin Yu broke into a cold sweat. Best to focus on other people’s dirty laundry, maybe. “And—I heard you had a fight with Chengzhu, and now you’re dragging everyone into your plan, even His Highness. And...that’s bad.”

“...”

“...”

Finally, Yin Yu sat down on the bench by the side of the pond, rubbing his forehead wearily, “I’m no good at saying any of this,” he mumbled. “The truth is, I just don’t understand you.”

Yin Yu tensed for a moment, expecting the connection to cut off. When it didn’t, he cleared his throat and went on cautiously.

“I don’t understand what’s so good about revenge. And I almost got it, you know. Almost. When Quan Yizhen was wearing the Brocade Immortal, and I told him to go die—“ Yin Yu’s voice cracked. “Even though it was an accident, I think—I might have meant it, deep down. But in the split second that I saw him getting ready to actually do it, I realized that it wasn’t worth it. If he’d died, I don’t know what I would’ve done. No matter how complicated I feel about him, he’s just an innocent dummy, he doesn’t deserve to die. Living with that, knowing I killed him, it would be worse than dying. I’d feel like shit forever. Is that really what you’re looking for? It’s not worth it. Seriously, it’s not worth it.”

He left a few moments for a response, but none came.

“I mean...” Yin Yu faltered. “Maybe you could justify killing Water Master, but...you like Qingxuan, don’t you? He doesn’t deserve it. You’ll feel bad if you do something to him. You’re friends. Seriously.”

Biting the inside of his lip, Yin Yu listened for a reply. Hearing nothing, he started getting frustrated.

“Come on. Black Water, come *on*. Even *you’ll* feel awful after going through with this. I can promise it, I can swear it on my—I don’t even—can’t you stop? It would be so easy. If you want to give everything up, you can still do it. I know you hate being in the heavens. I hated it too. Just stop it and come back to ghost city. You can eat all the food you want, whatever. It’s not bad to live a simple life. What’s the point?”

He stared down unhappily into the water.

“Sometimes—isn’t it just better to move on?”

Yin Yu wracked his brain for something else to say, the magic words that would make everything okay and avert tragedy, but it was too late. The connection crackled and disconnected.

Then, hours later, the communication from Hua Cheng.

“Water Master’s dead.”

Something heavy sank into Yin Yu’s chest. “What about Wind Master?”

There was a long pause. Then:

“We’ll talk later.”

.

.

.

Yin Yu tried to put it out of mind. What else could he do?

But, as always, some things were impossible to outrun. A few days later, Hua Cheng called to his private quarters.

“Learn to use this,” he said, and tossed Yin Yu a long object. Yin Yu caught it and looked down.

The Earth Master shovel.

Yin Yu gaped. “How did you—?”

Hua Cheng shrugged. “How do you think?”

“Does this mean...” Yin Yu went a little pale. “Did he finally...? And Wind Master—?!”

“I’m not allowed to tell you anything,” Hua Cheng interrupted. “Just that it’s yours now.”

Yin Yu couldn’t fathom what it meant. Had Black Water meant for him to have this? Why? It would’ve been nice if it had come with an instructional manual, but most of all, Yin Yu wished it had come with a note. It could’ve been simple: I’m giving this to you because...

Because you're fit to carry on Earth Master's legacy?

Because I'm going to dissipate, and it's trash, and you might as well take it?

Because you're worthy of having your own spiritual device?

Because you shouldn't forget that my bloodshed stains your hands too?

It was impossible to know, but it was fine. By now, Yin Yu was used to not getting answers. He started training with the shovel.

For a little bit, things went back to normal.

Then, of course, Tonglu opened, and Yizhen barreled back into his life, and everything went straight to hell.



It wasn't until he was dying in His Highness' arms that it really all caught up to him.

Resentment, guilt, regret—it overflowed, and he had no choice but to let it run. He'd never liked to talk about any of it, but now he was like a parched animal finding water; he'd found the only person who might understand him. The words came up on their own, and he spilled out all his regrets to this Highness he'd barely ever known.

And Xie Lian comforted him, as best he could, and Yin Yu's tears welled up. He was dying full of resentment, but here was someone who understood resentment too. To die in arms like this, tasting a sliver of the warmth of Hua Cheng's most cherished jewel—who wouldn't wait an eternity for this? If Yin Yu toiled so many years in service of him, this would be the sole reward, and maybe it was worth it. Maybe Yin Yu had always just wanted to be understood. The more he poured everything out, the more Yizhen's screams seemed to fade away from beside him.

And yet.

"But I wanted to be a god," he croaked out.

Then Xie Lian said something that didn't quite make sense to him, and Yin Yu's vision was fading. Out, out, out of his body—if this was how it ended, it wasn't too bad. The feeling of an incredible weight off his shoulders. Yin Yu's regrets, Yin Yu's resentment, Yin Yu's fears and hopes and worries, all fading away.

Because he didn't have to be Yin Yu anymore. Not now, not ever again.

A feeling of peace came over him.

He closed his eyes.



Then, Yin Yu woke up.

“...”

For a few moments, he squinted up at a straw ceiling, uncomprehending. What the—

“SHIXIONG!” Quan Yizhen cried out, springing to his feet. “You woke up!”

No.

NO.

NO NO NO NO NO NO NO—

“Huh?!” Yin Yu rasped weakly, turning his head. “What—“

Quan Yizhen’s face filled his vision, and a pair of overly strong hands gripped his shoulders. “Hi, Shixiong! You were gone for a long time, but now you woke up. Crimson Rain Sought Flower showed me how to help you, so I’ve been working really hard, even though it’s really boring—”

Yin Yu screamed.

“Huh? What’s wrong—?”

“GET AWAY!” Yin Yu cried out, scrambling back from him. He went back too far, though, and fell straight off the bed.

“Shixiong!” Quan Yizhen said, coming around the bed. “Stop being crazy, you’ll get hurt.”

Yin Yu scrambled against the wall of the hut, his knees knocking together. He was like a newborn lamb, pathetic and tremulous. “What do you mean? What do you mean?” he mumbled. “What do you mean, you’ve been working hard? What—“

“Oh, there was this shackle that had your soul in it, so I had to learn about cultivating and stuff. By the way, Jun Wu got beaten. Anyway—”

“So you BROUGHT ME BACK?!” Yin Yu roared.

Quan Yizhen nodded, seeming to miss the tone. “Uh huh!”

“No,” Yin Yu sobbed. “No—”

At that, Quan Yizhen faltered. “What do you mean, no? I did it, all by myself.”

“Got to go,” Yin Yu choked out. His bleary eyes found the door. “Got to—“

“Shixiong, you can’t go.” Quan Yizhen put on an admonishing tone. “You’ll get hurt really bad again.”

“Leave me ALONE!” Yin Yu shouted, then started scrambling for the door—

But Quan Yizhen was like a dog; when something started running, his whole attention was on it. His eyes fixed on Yin Yu, and he crouched.

“Hnnghh—!” Letting out a choked whimper, Yin Yu tried to move, but Quan Yizhen moved too, getting in his way. When Yin Yu changed direction, stumbling, Quan Yizhen stalked him like a wolf.

No way. No way. Yin Yu couldn’t beat someone like this. He would always be inferior.

Stopping in his tracks, Yin Yu collapsed onto the ground, buried his head in his knees, and started to sob.

At that, Quan Yizhen finally eased his stance and cried out in distress. “Shixiong!”

“Why can’t you—hic—leave me ALONE!”

“It’s okay, I hate waking up in the morning too—”

“WHY DID YOU HAVE TO SAVE ME?!” Yin Yu bawled. “Why YOU? Why, heavens, why did it have to be YOU? I get that I owed you back then, I get it, the whole universe was telling me, I fucking *get* it! And paid it back, I died, I paid it all back—how DARE you put this back on me?!”

Quan Yizhen’s brow furrowed. “You’re mad because I saved your life?”

“YES!” Yin Yu burst out. “YES! I’M MAD!”

“But—“ Quan Yizhen blinked slowly, then stepped forward. “Wait, but it’s different now, it’s not like before!”

“Leave me alone, leave me alone, please, please...”

“Shixiong, I’ve been talking to lots of people while you’ve been gone,” Quan Yizhen said. “I know I’m annoying now. You always told me I wasn’t annoying, but now I get that you were just trying to be nice. So I’m going to try not to be annoying from now on, so I won’t bother you anymore.”

Yin Yu reached instinctively for the side of his face, where his mask would usually have been, wanting to shove it on top of the mess of his face. Finding that it wasn’t there anymore, he cried harder.

“That was supposed to help,” Quan Yizhen said, confused.

“Yizhen, I CAN’T! I CAN’T!”

“Can’t what?”

“IT DOESN’T MATTER, I JUST CAN’T!”

Quan Yizhen furrowed his brow. “Is this still about the dumb coat that made me kill people? I know that was an accident.”

“Just leave me alone,” Yin Yu sobbed. “Leave me alone, leave me *alone*...”

“Okay,” Quan Yizhen said, suddenly resolute. He stepped back. “Shixiong, if you want to go, I won’t chase.”

Yin Yu started getting up.

“But you shouldn’t go, since you’re still sick and—”

“STOP!” Yin Yu wailed. Then, without waiting to hear the rest of the sentence, he barreled out the door and ran.

He ran and ran across the field of grass outside, leaving a spray of dew in his wake, not knowing where he was going, barely understanding any part of what had happened; but all of a sudden, as he ran, he felt something knocking against his thigh in his pocket. Reaching in, he pulled out a pair of dice.

Wiping off his eyes with his sleeve, he tossed them.



The main doors of paradise manor loomed over Yin Yu, just as he remembered them. Tall, red, imposing.

He stood in front of them, drenched and dripping with rain, his shoulders slumped just slightly. After a few minutes, the door opened a crack, and a little ghost servant poked his head out.

“What the shit—HEY! There IS someone out there! What’re ya doing, standin’ there? This is Hua Chengzhu’s residence, wanna die?!”

Yin Yu raised his bare face, staring glumly at him. “I’m looking for Chengzhu. I need to talk to him.”

“Heh! YOU wanna talk? Awright, it’s been a while since I saw a good ol’ beheading. Lard Chengzhu, it’s—h-holy—YOUR HIGHNESS—?!”

All of a sudden, the door was thrown back open, and someone was practically flying out.

“YIN YU!” Xie Lian cried out, launching himself at him. Strong arms crushed Yin Yu, the very same arms he’d died into. “Thank goodness, thank goodness. Look, you’re all wet. Come in—

“Your Highness,” Yin Yu said weakly, muffled into his shoulder.

Before he could even think of the first thing to say, he was being pulled in through the door and hastily brushed off. “It’s not bad at all,” Xie Lian said in wonder, checking him over. “Qi Ying really does have a head on his shoulders. Where is he? Did he come with you?”

Yin Yu pressed his lips together. He was tearing up, but he didn’t know why. “I...I actually...”

“Oh, I see.” Xie Lian interrupted with a sigh. “Don’t worry, don’t worry. You don’t have to talk about this, you’ll have time later.” He wrapped him in another embrace. “I’m just so glad to see you alive.”

It was then, through misty eyes, that Yin Yu saw someone over Xie Lian’s shoulder.

Hua Cheng stood in the main hall, his arms crossed. He was looking over at Yin Yu with ease, watching him get choked to death by Xie Lian's embrace. Still, he made no move to come over.

Evidently knowing that a reunion was in order, Xie Lian gave Yin Yu's shoulder one last squeeze and stepped aside.

Yin Yu met Hua Cheng's eyes with some difficulty, feeling awkward and out of place.

Hua Cheng gazed back for a moment before speaking simply:

"Welcome back."

"Thanks," Yin Yu said hoarsely.

Something silent seemed to pass between them, and then Hua Cheng spoke again.

"Nobody touched your room," he said. "It's just as you left it. If you want to come back, that is."

Yin Yu was silent.

"One month's vacation first," Hua Cheng added. "After that, same wages as before."

With a snort, Yin Yu finally hung his head. "...en," he replied. "I think I'd like that."

He started forward, but suddenly, Xie Lian's hand took his shoulder.

"Your Highness Yin Yu, wait," he said. There was something a bit pained in his voice. "Before that, there's...something we have to show you."

Yin Yu blinked down at him. "Something to show me?"

Hua Cheng stepped forward, coming to stand in front of Yin Yu. He reached into a flap of his coat, into a tiny pocket hidden inside. Then, he pulled something out.

"Hold out your hands," he said quietly.

Confused, Yin Yu held them out, cupped together. Hua Cheng placed the object into them.

It was a little charm, like something that might be worn on a necklace or a bracelet. The material seemed somewhat like diamond, glittering subtly in the low light of the manor. It had been carved into the shape of a moon.

"What's this?" Yin Yu said blankly.

Neither of the two responded.

"...what's this?" Yin Yu said. Now, though, a wave of dizziness swept over him. He stumbled back a step. "No way. What's this? You, you're not...serious. Right?"

"I'm sorry," Xie Lian said, putting a steadying hand on his back. "Once the soul is removed from the body, putting it back is...troublesome."

"Your body was in good condition," Hua Cheng added, "So there was a good base to build on. As long as you keep your ashes with you, you should stay looking like yourself, at least until you manage to reach a higher rank and you can change forms easily."

Yin Yu felt numb. The little charm in his hand felt heavy like lead. “Higher...rank?”

“Higher rank of ghost,” Xie Lian said gently.

Yin Yu shook his head. “I can’t be dead,”

“You’re not dead,” Hua Cheng said, with some amusement. “You’re a ghost.”

“How? I don’t...I can’t be dead, I can’t be a ghost. I can’t.” Yin Yu shook his head again. “*You’re* a ghost. You care about...His Highness, and...Black Water cared about...his...this doesn’t make sense. I don’t get it.”

But Hua Cheng raised a brow. “No matter how hard Qi Ying tried, the summoning wouldn’t have worked unless you had unfinished business too. You’re a real ghost.”

“Isn’t there something you want?” Xie Lian coaxed.

“...” Yin Yu looked down at the thing in his hands. His vision had cleared a little. “I think...”

He thought it over for a moment, then closed a hand around his ashes. “I think I want to be good.”

A pause. Then—

“I think I want to be the best that I can be,” he said clumsily, though his eyes were shining. “I want—I want to be a god.”

“Then that’s that.” Hua Cheng shrugged. “It isn’t unheard of, for a ghost to ascend. You’ll just have to keep working for it.”

“Right,” Yin Yu breathed.

He didn’t have to breathe anymore, he realized as he did it, but it was fine. He’d lived in ghost city for so long now, belonged here more than he’d ever belonged to the heavens, that this wasn’t anything shattering. The Yin Yu that had ascended for the first time had died long ago, after all. He’d been a ghost all the while, living in the shadow of a lost dream; what was this, if not becoming more truly what he’d been all along?

Hadn’t he always belonged more to the city of forever seeking than the city of forever having?

Yin Yu smiled through his tears.

“Right.”



Yin Yu, Hua Cheng said into the array.

What.

Slip five more cards into His Highness’ pile.

Yin Yu was playing arbiter in a card game between Hua Chengzhu and His Highness Xie Lian; they'd needed a third player to keep track of the score, and as always, there was only one reluctant servant around at this time of night.

But Yin Yu gave Hua Cheng a dry look.

You want him to win?

Yes.

By making him cheat? Again?

Hua Cheng didn't look up, pretending to be absorbed in his cards. *Quick, put them in before he looks up.*

Yin Yu sighed. Then, after a careful glance at Xie Lian—he was shuffling through his cards, appearing deeply engrossed—he reached for the main pile. Seeing the stack, though, he cleared his throat.

“There's only three cards left,” he announced.

Both Hua Cheng and Xie Lian looked up.

“It looks like it's time to count the points for this round,” Yin Yu said. “Put down your—“

“Isn't it earlier than usual?” Hua Cheng mused. “There should be more cards, given the amount of turns we've played.”

Nobody said a word.

“...”

“...”

Then—

“Gege,” Hua Cheng pointed out. “You're blushing.”

“I...” Xie Lian coughed, putting down his cards. “Wait. I, I actually might have...”

“Hm?”

“You always slip extra cards in my pile and make me win,” Xie Lian said slowly, his face pink. “And I wanted to get back at you, so I...”

He put a hand over his face.

“I might have told Yin Yu to put more cards in your pile when you weren't looking.”

There was a split second of shock, and then Hua Cheng was roaring with laughter.

“Your Highness,” Yin Yu said in disbelief. “You weren't supposed to say anything.”

“I'm sorry!” Xie Lian was turning redder. “I just took a few extra cards. I was feeling guilty about it, so I was going to reveal everything at the end, but I wanted to—“

Hua Cheng was still laughing. “Gege, gege, you were supposed to be good; how can I take you to the gambler’s den, knowing you’ll do something shameless like this?”

“That’s not—you always do it to me, so I thought I’d—!”

“I’m going to bed,” Yin Yu sighed, standing up.

“Thanks, Yin Yu,” Xie Lian called out, still red as a beet. “Sorry!”

“Don’t mention it,” he said dryly.

Hua Cheng smirked. “Yin Yu, next time, you have to tell me if His Highness makes such a request. I’d quickly make sure things are set right.”

“What next time,” Yin Yu mumbled, and left. Only once he was out did he smile and give a weary laugh.

He walked out into the night, walked and walked, leaving the peals of laughter and flustered rebuttals behind him. After some time, he reached the little pond by the manor.

After a moment, he sat down on the bench beside it, gazing into the water. The moon was reflected in it, rippling in the breeze.

Yin Yu reached for the little moon charm hung around his neck, fiddling with it idly.

He must’ve been there for about an hour, meditating, when footsteps sounded behind him. Turning, he saw Xie Lian walking over.

“Sorry,” Xie Lian said, with a gentle smile. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

“Not at all, Your Highness.”

“Do you mind if I sit?”

Yin Yu shifted aside, clearing a spot. Xie Lian sat down, then sighed.

“It’s nice here, isn’t it? Even if it’s in ghost city, it’s peaceful.”

“It’s by Chengzhu’s orders,” Yin Yu replied.

“You really know how everything works around here.”

“Of course.”

There was silence.

“I actually wanted to ask you some things,” Xie Lian said haltingly. “Actually, it’s more like one big thing. If you don’t have time, it’s okay.”

Yin Yu was curious now. “I have time.”

“You worked with San Lang for a long time...how long has it been?”

With a laugh, Yin Yu shook his head. “To be honest, Your Highness, I’ve lost track.”

“At least a hundred years, though.”

“At least.”

“That’s a long time to know somebody.”

“Yeah.”

And finally, Xie Lian came to his main point, clearing his throat and asking plainly:

“Could you tell me what San Lang was like, before he found me again? How did you two meet?”

Yin Yu looked down into the pond, watching the ripples distort his face.

“It’s a long story,” he said quietly and began.

Yin Yu talked and talked, saying as much as he remembered; he spoke of a city of tents, a meeting with a new calamity, of three odd characters coming together to discuss an ancient language, of a Hua Cheng who fought savagely and a Hua Cheng who couldn’t get out of bed. As Yin Yu spoke, however, Xie Lian’s questions turned more curious, cautiously digging a little deeper.

And so Yin Yu told him about the other things he wanted to know, too—about a banished god who’d become a ghost; about fortune’s fool, clinging to the coattails of luck, making it out alive with a little less dignity and a little more wisdom than before.

When Yin Yu was finished with it all, hoarse from telling, Xie Lian finally nodded.

“I see,” he said. “...Yin Yu?”

“Yes, Your Highness?”

“I want to tell you something important.”

“Of cou—“

All of a sudden, Yin Yu was being embraced by strong arms. He blinked in surprise.

“Thank you for taking care of him,” Xie Lian said quietly. “When I couldn’t be there.”

Yin Yu stared over Xie Lian’s shoulder for a few moments, before giving a tired smile. “You’re welcome, Your Highness, but—honestly, I feel like he was the one taking care of me. Not the other way around.”

“No. He told me.”

“He...?”

“He really needed you. He doesn’t know how to say it to you yet, but he wants to. He told me.” Xie Lian’s voice turned embarrassed. “Don’t...tell him that I told you, though. It’s a secret.”

Yin Yu turned it over in his head for a few moments, but finally sighed.

“It’s all right, Your Highness,” he replied. “I already knew anyway.”

With that, Xie Lian laughed. Then, he stood and placed a hand on Yin Yu's shoulder before leaving, and added:

"It's hard to tell people important things, but it's worse to be left with regrets."

"En."

"His Highness Qi Ying hasn't been by to look for you since you came."

"...en."

"Do you think maybe he's trying to keep his promise?"

Yin Yu was quiet for a little while, but it was fine; Xie Lian wasn't looking for an answer. He gave Yin Yu's shoulder one last pat and walked back into paradise manor.



Yin Yu stood at a ghost city stall, squinting down at the little figurines. He wasn't wearing his waning moon mask, so he was just another anonymous ghost among many, but the shopkeeper still extended an unnaturally long neck and leered.

"See anythin' you like?"

After a few moments of looking, Yin Yu pointed at a little jade figurine. "What's that one?"

"That one?" The strange swan-like creature chuckled. "Aw, that's ol' Waning Moon! Chief Officer of Lord Chengzhu. You ain't seen him? Real tall, wears that funny mask."

"Hmm."

"They say if you put one a' these near yer doorway, you'll get a little luck."

"Just little luck?" Yin Yu looked over at another row of statues. "Why wouldn't someone just get one of the Chengzhu ones? Those are pretty lucky."

"Easy!" the shopkeeper squawked. "Cause they're too lucky. Some people, they want luck to get 'em *part* of the way there. What's left, they wanna do themselves."

Yin Yu suppressed a laugh, wondering whether anyone would really buy such a thing, when suddenly —

"Shixiong!" An enormous presence stuck to his side. "I'm hungry."

"All right, all right," Yin Yu sighed. With a polite smile to the shopkeeper, he beckoned to Quan Yizhen. "What do you want to eat?"

Quan Yizhen was wearing a mask—too recognizable to wander uncovered—but the mass of curly hair behind it was a dead giveaway to anyone really looking.

They started walking, and Quan Yizhen pointed at a random stand. "How about that?"

“You don’t want that.”

“How come?”

“It’s...never mind. Look, just go to that...tentacle stand over there and get something for us both.”

“Okay,” said Quan Yizhen. Before he went, though, he clumsily mashed his mask against Yin Yu’s face

Yin Yu spluttered, stumbling back. “Just—just take it off for a second, it’s fine!”

“But Shixiong, you said nobody should—“

“One second is fine.”

So Quan Yizhen shoved aside his mask, revealing bright eyes underneath, and quickly pressed a sloppy kiss to Yin Yu’s face before running off to the stand. “Wait for me, Shixiong!”

Yin Yu remained behind, frozen stiff, before wiping off his mouth with his sleeve. Yizhen, he really...

All of a sudden, something bumped against his leg. He looked down.

It was a ball.

Looking towards the direction the ball had come from, Yin Yu saw a child on the side of the bustling ghost city market, a little boy; he giggled, watching Yin Yu from afar.

With a smile, Yin Yu picked it up and walked over, rolling it gently over. “Here.”

A waiting pair of pudgy hands caught it.

Then—

The child suddenly looked up at Yin Yu fixedly, all emotion wiping away. Immediately, the expression on the tiny face went blank.

Yin Yu startled so hard that he almost jumped.

The child continued to stare up at him emptily.

Then, however, the expression on the face changed.

Slowly, slowly, the lower lip bunched up. Slowly, slowly, the eyes grew wide and watery. As Yin Yu watched in shock, the water in those dark eyes welled up into fat tears which trickled down the child’s cheeks.

But before he could say a word—

“Hey!” A voice called. “Lil’ Hei! Don’t run away—what happened?! Why are you crying—oh, wow! Your Highness Yin Yu?”

Yin Yu looked up from the child, straight into Shi Qingxuan’s shocked expression. “I’m—”

“Oh yeah, of course you’d be here, since you’re...haha, hahaha. Anyway, nice to see you around!”

Yin Yu smiled. “Likewise.”

“You’ve got a great city going here, too!” Shi Qingxuan gave his cane a mischievous tilt. “Really, this ghost city market’s not bad at all! As long as you’re careful about what you eat. Isn’t that right, lil’ Hei?”

The child kept on crying silently, eerily, in a way that no child should’ve known to cry—nearly expressionless, only the tears giving away his anguish.

Yin Yu pointed down at him. “This is your...?”

“Just a little kid I found on the street. Said his name is Hei, but I can’t figure out anything else! It’s okay, I don’t mind an extra mouth to feed. We have fun together, anyway. Right, lil’ Hei?”

The child didn’t reply, still staring up balefully at Yin Yu.

“Haha, hahaha, he’s not that talkative. When are little kids supposed to start talking anyway? I don’t even know...”

As Shi Qingxuan chattered on, Yin Yu knelt slowly in front of the child, looking into the pair of dark and reddened eyes.

“You’re always welcome to come visit us, you know,” Yin Yu said quietly. “To come see me and Hua Chengzhu.”

“Wow! Didja hear that?” Shi Qingxuan ruffled the child’s hair. “You’ve been invited to the Ghost King’s manor! That’s no easy feat, hahaha, hahahahaha...ah, still crying. Well, it can’t be helped.” He picked up the child, hoisting him onto his hip with some effort. The cane in one hand wobbled. “C’m on, let’s go get you something to eat, I scraped up some coins. Can you believe it, Your Highness? Food food food, it’s the only thing that’ll get him quiet! So fussy. Anyway, you wanna come with us?”

“No thanks,” said Yin Yu. “Good luck, Wind Master.”

“So formal,” Shi Qingxuan clucked. “I’m ol’ Feng now, got it? All right, see you later. Say bye to Yin Yu, lil’ Hei.” He turned and started down the path, hobbling with some difficulty. “You’ve gotta learn manners, don’tcha know? Come on, say bye bye, bye bye, bye bye...”

Over Shi Qingxuan’s shoulder, the little child’s face remained staring back at Yin Yu, bobbing with the limping steps that carried him, leaking tears silently down round cheeks. Never did the child’s tears stop, nor even lessen; it was as though they came from some endless spring deep in the earth, or beneath some bottomless ocean. They kept leaking down and down, down and down, as he was carried up over a hill and into the bustling market crowds.

I DID NOT FORGET ABOUT THIS FIC, HERE I AM AGAIN, WEEHOOO!!! THAT SURE TOOK A WHILE. BUT PEPPERIDGE FARM REMEMBERS

THANK YOU TO EVERYONE WHO SLAPPED MY ASS FOR LIKE MONTHS TO GET ME TO FINISH THIS, I HOPE THIS CHAPTER REALLY SLAPPED YOUR ASS RIGHT BACK

ANYHOW IM OUT OF WORDS I DONT HAVE ANY GOOD WORDS ANYMORE, I USED THEM ALL UP. SO I DO NOT KNOW WHAT TO SAY EXCEPT I LOVE YIN YU SO MUCH. I HOPE YOU ALL LOVE HIM NOW TOO. HIP HIP HOORAY!!!!!! LOVE AND KISSES FROM DEER

TWITTER PROMO: [HERE](#)

ALSO I AM WRITING A NOVEL, IF YOU LIKE VAMPIRES COME LOOK [HERE](#)

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